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THE

WHITE PHANTOM.

A ROMANCE.

BY

~~MISS~~ M. E. (BRADDON) MAXWELL

AUTHOR OF "OSCAR BERTRAND," "AURORA FLOYD," "DEAD SEA FRUIT," "LADY'S MILE," ETC. ETC.

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THE WHITE PHANTOM.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW OF DANGER.

It was four o'clock upon a dull afternoon in October. The West End of London was almost entirely deserted, except by a few solitary foot-passengers, who looked as lively as travellers in a desert.

In a studio in one of the small thoroughfares in the neighborhood of Regent Street, an artist sat at his easel.

He was young and handsome; but there was a look of discontent in his face, a shadow of care upon his brow, which gave an unnaturally grave expression to his countenance.

It was the face of a man who suffers, and suffers intensely.

The picture upon his easel was a small miniature portrait. The portrait of a woman beautiful as a dream, — beautiful as an angel or a fairy, — with that pure and enchanting loveliness which seems to speak of the skies, — almost too beautiful for this common earth and the creatures who dwell upon its surface.

The eyes were blue, large, bright, and limpid, — the softly deep azure of an Italian sky, melting into the darker purple of the Southern Ocean. The small nose was of the purest form of Grecian; the lips, of the bright crimson of a newly-ripened cherry, were slightly parted, disclosing teeth which glittered like Oriental pearls. The face was framed in floating tresses of hair, of that shining golden hue which is so often described by poets, yet so rarely seen in life.

The artist worked with the energy of a man who has but one object in life, — the completion of his task.

His head was bent over the easel; his hand trembled with a convulsive and nervous movement as he clutched his brushes and mixed his colors upon his palette.

He seemed like a man possessed by a demon.

A young girl, seated at a window at the opposite end of the studio, looked up every now and then from her work, and fixed her dark, watchful eyes upon the artist.

Each time that this girl raised her eyes to look at the young man, her gaze lingered longer upon his countenance, till at last she dropped her hands, her work lay neglected in her lap, and her eyes remained fixed upon the artist.

This girl was not beautiful, yet there was something in her face which, when once seen, remains forever engraven upon the memory of the beholder.

She was very pale, — so pale that, in the dim light of the October afternoon, her face seemed colorless as that of a marble statue. Her eyes were black, — of that profound black which has light in its depth; eyes which had something strange in their aspect, and which reminded those who looked into them of an open grave, — a fathomless abyss, hiding the secrets of the dead.

These dark eyes, looking out of a colorless face, had something mysterious in their gaze, and in the days of witchcraft would have struck terror to the hearts of the ignorant.

The artist did not see the earnest glance which was fixed upon him. He never raised his eyes from the miniature; now and then he sighed heavily as he paused for a moment from his labor. He seemed wrapt in some mournful dream, and utterly unconscious of all that was passing around him.

At last the young girl addressed him.

"Hubert," she said, "why do you work so hard?"

He laughed bitterly, but did not raise his head.

"Because I love my art," he answered, "and love little else."

"Is that so, Hubert?" said the girl, with an earnestness which was not unmixed with scorn. "Is that so?" she repeated, pointing to a pile of unfinished paintings leaning against the wall of the studio; "if it is your art which you love, why are your great pictures all cast aside, neglected, forgotten, for the portrait of a woman of fashion? for it is a portrait which you have there,—is it not?"

A dark and angry expression obscured the face of the artist as he answered this question.

"It is," he said, still bending over the easel, and never once looking at his questioner.

"The portrait of Lady Blanche Vavasour?"

"The portrait of Lady Blanche Vavasour," answered the artist, in a tone of defiance.

The girl laughed,—a harsh and mocking laugh, which had nothing womanly in its tone.

"It will be a charming ornament for my lady's boudoir," she said, "and she will doubtless value it as much as—"

She paused, looking with a malicious, an almost demoniac, smile at the artist, who had now raised his head from the easel.

The eyes of the two met.

"As much as what?" he asked.

"As much as she values the heart of the artist when it is cast beneath her feet. Nay, more; for when she is tired of the picture, she will only throw it aside, or give it to her lady's maid. She will not trample upon it. She has trampled upon the artist's heart!"

The young man rose from his seat, with a cry of rage, and then sprang towards the girl; then, restraining himself by a powerful effort, he sank again into his chair, and, clasping his hands before his face, wept aloud.

It was terrible to behold the grief of this strong man.

"Isadora! Cousin Isadora!" he exclaimed, when the tempest of grief had passed, "you are my father's brother's only daughter; you are my sole surviving relative, and I have always loved you as a sister. Why—why, then, do you torture me thus? You have discovered my secret; you know that I have loved—that I do love Blanche Vavasour—deeply—devotedly—wildly—foolishly, if you will! You know, also, that I am loved in return."

"I do *not* know that," interposed the girl, coldly.

"You do not know? Merciful Heaven! if there is truth in woman I am loved, and loved as truly as my devotion deserves. Why, then, why do you torture me, Isadora?"

"Because I despise you, cousin!"

"Despise me?" exclaimed the young man.

"Yes, Hubert Monkton, I despise you! I have something of my mother's Spanish blood in my veins. I came of a prouder race than yours, as you well know; for her ancestors trod the Spanish soil before ever the Moors had invaded the land of the Cid. I am the last of a race of soldiers, and I despise the man who loves, as weakly as you do, this blue-eyed coquette!"

"Coquette! Isadora?"

"Ay! and so finished a coquette that she has power to blind and delude you, as she would a child, with the promise of a plaything. Love you, cousin! Bah! Lady Blanche Vavasour knows not the meaning of the word. Power—pomp—rank—wealth—admiration,—those are the things that she loves; but not you, Hubert Monkton."

"It is false, Isadora!" exclaimed the artist. "Were you a man, I would wring the lie from your throat."

"You think that she will marry you?" said Isadora, with a mocking smile; "that she will descend from her throne; that she will abandon her place as the lovely queen of fashion, to become the wife of a struggling artist?"

"I do," answered Hubert Monkton. "True, I am poor, unknown, unnoticed, but what of that? Blest by her love I shall have power to fight life's mighty battle. For her sake how easy will be my toil! For her sake how

gladly will I labor! Trust me, cousin, the world shall hear of the husband of Lady Blanche, and art and beauty shall go hand in hand. Ah, Isadora, it is you who know not how to love!"

The girl recoiled with a brief shudder, as her cousin uttered these words.

"You are, doubtless, right, Hubert," she said, slowly, and with a strange emphasis. "It is I who know not how to love."

"Isadora," exclaimed the young man, after a pause, "give me some proof of what you say; give me proof of the falsehood of her I love."

The girl rose from her chair and walked a few paces towards a table on the other side of the room, — a table covered with books and papers.

"Shall I?" she said, pausing midway between her chair and this table, and looking earnestly at her cousin.

"Yes, yes."

"But you will hate me ever afterwards, — as we hate those who destroy our brightest and most cherished dreams?"

"No, cousin; prove to me that she is false, and I shall hate myself for my mad folly."

"And you will be cured?"

"Yes — forever."

"It is for your own happiness, Hubert, that I torture you," answered Isadora, selecting a newspaper from those scattered upon the table.

She handed this paper to her cousin, and then resumed her seat, watching furtively from under the shadow of her long eyelashes.

He read the paragraph to which she had pointed, and the newspaper dropped from his hand.

He sat, silent and motionless, staring into vacancy.

The paragraph which he had read was worded thus: —

"MARRIAGE IN HIGH LIFE. — We understand that the Duke of Arlington is about to lead the lovely Lady Blanche Vavasour, only daughter of Lord Templeton, to the hymeneal altar. His Grace is one of the wealthiest of our nobility."

"Well, cousin," said Isadora, after a long pause, "are you satisfied of her falsehood?"

"No!" cried the artist, passionately. "No! only from her own lips will I condemn her. This may be only the idle gossip of the hangers-on of the fashionable world. My love! my love!" he exclaimed, addressing the picture upon the easel, "how can I doubt you? Truth looks from those radiant eyes; love breathes from those rosy lips, and no words but your own will convince me of your falsehood."

At this moment a carriage suddenly stopped in the street below, and a fashionable footman's rap resounded from the knocker.

"Perhaps you may hear those words ere long," said Isadora, looking from the window, "for Lady Blanche Vavasour is here. It must be something very extraordinary which can have brought the queen of fashion to the artist's humble studio."

"Blanche here!" cried Hubert Monkton. "You are dreaming, Isadora."

"Convince yourself, then, cousin. There is my Lady's carriage; and there is my Lady herself," added Isadora, as an elegantly dressed woman descended from the vehicle.

The artist's careworn face grew pale as he recognized the original of the miniature.

"Blanche at my studio!" he muttered; "something strange must have happened. Leave me, Isadora; leave me," he added, with nervous impatience; "I must see her alone."

The young girl retired silently into an adjoining apartment, which was divided from the artist's studio by heavy curtains of damask.

Hubert Monkton listened to her retreating footsteps, and then going to the curtains, parted them, and looked into the apartment within.

It was empty. His Cousin Isadora had left it by a door opposite the curtained archway, — a door which led to the other part of the house.

"All is safe," said Hubert, as he closed the curtains; "we must have no listener. I scarcely know why, but there is something in Isadora's manner which inspires me with fear. What a terrible hatred she betrays towards the woman whom I love!"

He was silent; his heart beating vio-

lently as he listened to a light footstep upon the staircase without.

"It is she!" he exclaimed; "it is Blanche!"

The door opened and the original of the miniature entered the room.

Lady Blanche Vavasour was paler than the artist himself. Her large blue eyes were surrounded by purple circles, which told of sleepless nights, harassed by anxious thoughts. The hand which she extended to the artist trembled as he grasped it in both his own.

"You here, Blanche?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she answered, withdrawing her hand. "I come alone, unannounced, at the risk of my reputation, because life and death are in the errand."

"Life and death!"

"Yes, Hubert, my life or my death. I came to demand of you a sacrifice."

"A sacrifice!" repeated the artist, trembling.

"A sacrifice, Hubert," said Lady Blanche; "you must release me from the vows which bind us!"

"Release you, Blanche? Never!"

"You must, I tell you, Hubert," she said, her large eyes dilating with a glance of feverish brightness. "I told you just now that I came upon an errand of life and death. I spoke the truth when I said so. I can never be your wife!"

As Lady Blanche uttered these last words, a singular change came over the face of the artist. Until that moment his gaze had been fixed with earnest adoration upon the countenance of the woman he loved; but as those words were spoken his brow contracted, the sight in his eyes slowly faded, and the lines about his mouth assumed the rigidity of iron.

It was as if in that one moment his feeling for Lady Blanche Vavasour had been transformed from love to hate.

"I understand you, my Lady," he said. "It is an old story. The artist who painted your portrait, and who fell wildly in love with the original, was no doubt amusing — for a time. But ridiculous as the man's folly has been, you have at last grown weary of it, and you come to-day to tell him so."

"Hubert, you are mocking me!"

"No, madam; it is you who have mocked me. It is you who have sported with the heart of the humble artist. It is you who have led him on with dreams of Elysium, and who now casts him back upon the realities of hell. Do not fear me, Lady Blanche; I release you from the vows which you breathed a few brief months ago. The woman I loved was all truth and constancy; but I discover to-day that she was but a creature of the artist's fancy, — she was never Lady Blanche Vavasour. I have read of your intended marriage in the 'Morning Post,' madam. I know all."

"But you do not know the motives for that marriage, Hubert."

"I do not seek to know them."

"You do not know that my father is a ruined man; that this marriage alone can save me from abject poverty, — the most abject, the most terrible poverty, — the poverty of the great, who dare not confess that they are poor."

"I would have worked for you, Blanche," said the artist, reproachfully.

"Yes; and at best your work would have given me — bread!" answered Lady Blanche, with a bitter laugh. "It was a bright dream, Hubert. Do not be angry with me if I am the first to awaken from that dream. You could never have given me wealth and splendor, and those are as necessary to me as the air I breathe. The Duke of Arlington can give me these, and he can save my father from ruin. I have therefore accepted him."

"So be it, madam; and you have come to bid me farewell. I do not complain. Shall I reconduct you to your carriage?"

"Not yet, Hubert. I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor!"

"Yes. In the old, happy time, while our brief dream of love lasted, I wrote you several letters, — letters in which I poured out my soul to the man I loved. You have them still?"

"I have them still. Ay, Blanche Vavasour, I have kept them as a miser would keep the rarest jewels from a monarch's crown. There are thirteen of those dear letters, — thirteen letters filled with vows of love and constancy, which I, poor fool, believed."

"You must return me those letters, Hubert," said Lady Blanche.

"Return them! Why, madam?"

"Because the Duke of Arlington is a proud man. When he made me the offer of his hand he extorted from me an oath that I had never loved before."

"And you took that false oath, Lady Blanche Vavasour?"

"I did, Hubert. I was mad, perhaps, but I took the oath. Now, listen to me. Should those letters ever by any chance fall into the hands of the duke, all will be discovered, and he will fling me from him with scorn and loathing. You must give me those letters, Hubert, that I may burn them with my own hands."

"I understand, Lady Blanche. You ask me to restore those letters in order that you may destroy them, and that the duke may remain under the delusion that he is the first love of your virgin heart?"

"I do, Hubert. I will ask it on my knees if you will," she answered, clasping her hands.

"And were you to kneel at my feet for an hour, Lady Blanche, I would refuse," said the artist, with calm determination.

"You would refuse?"

"Yes; I refuse to see an honorable man become the dupe of a heartless woman. You thought to make me a victim, Lady Blanche Vavasour; but you have raised a demon in the breast of the man whom you have deceived, and instead of a victim you shall find an avenger. The Duke of Arlington shall not go blindfold to the altar. Before mid-day to-morrow those thirteen letters shall be in his hands."

There was a pause, — a pause of terrible silence, — during which the rapid and gasping breath of the lady was alone heard in the apartment.

The interview had not taken place without a listener. The pale face and black eyes of Isadora Monkton appeared between the folds of the curtain.

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed Lady Blanche, after that ominous pause, "you cannot mean this, Hubert. You cannot mean to be so cruel?"

"As there is light in the sky, I will do what I have said," he answered, with icy coldness.

"And you will have no mercy?"

"None. You have been merciless to me, and you shall find me merciless."

Again there was a pause.

"You will not send the letters to his Grace to-night, Hubert?" said Lady Blanche.

"Perhaps to-night, madam, perhaps to-morrow."

"Grant me one mercy. Promise me not to send them till to-morrow."

"So be it. I promise. And now, madam, let me escort you to your carriage. We can have nothing more to say to each other."

"Do not touch me," she exclaimed, as the artist extended his hand in order to conduct her to the staircase. "I would rather that our hands never met again. Remember, Hubert Monkton," she said, solemnly, "remember that I have asked you to be merciful, and that you have refused. Whatever happens, remember that."

She waved him aside and left the room; then, hurrying down the stairs, she sprang lightly into her carriage and drove away.

The lamps were lighted in the street below the windows, and the artist's studio was half in shadow when Lady Blanche left the house.

An hour later Hubert Monkton and his Cousin Isadora were seated at their simple dinner in the apartment adjoining the studio.

The artist pushed aside his untouched plate, and, with his head resting on his hand, abandoned himself to bitter reflection.

Isadora Monkton never removed her eyes from the face of her cousin, but she kept silence, and did not attempt to disturb his reverie.

They had sat for nearly an hour over their untasted meal, when the servant of the house entered and handed a letter to Hubert.

The young man opened it mechanically, and shrugged his shoulders with an impatient gesture as he read the brief contents of the epistle.

"How provoking!" he said; "a commission to-night, above all other nights!"

"A commission!" exclaimed Isadora; "from whom?"

"From a stranger. Listen, Isadora:

"'Mr. Wilson, having heard of the rising genius of Mr. Hubert Monkton, is anxious to treat with him for a picture to add to Mr. Wilson's collection of modern paintings. As Mr. Wilson's stay in London is very short, he will be obliged if Mr. Monkton will call upon him this evening at nine o'clock, at Mordaunt's Hotel, Blackfriars.'"

"You will not go, Hubert, will you?" said Isadora; "you have suffered so much to-day, and you are worn out with all you have endured. You will not go?"

"Not go, Cousin Isadora?" exclaimed the young man; "you must, indeed, think me weak if you can imagine that the loss of a false woman can so much affect me. No! no! Art shall console me. A glorious future shall wipe out the past. I will show this woman that the artist in his greatness may be worthy the love of an empress."

Hubert Monkton rose and looked at his watch.

"Half-past eight," he said; "a cab will take me to Blackfriars in half an hour. Good-night, Isadora."

"When will you return?" asked his cousin.

"By eleven at the latest."

"Cousin Hubert," said Isadora Monkton, earnestly, "do not go to this place to-night. There is something at my heart that tells me that harm to yourself will result from this meeting. If this Mr. Wilson desires to patronize you, let him come here — or let him wait till to-morrow."

"Impossible, Isadora. I may lose a valuable patron if I fail to keep this appointment."

He took his hat from a side-table, and was hurrying away, when his cousin laid her hand upon his arm.

It was a singular hand, white and thin, — so thin as to be almost transparent.

"Stay, Hubert," she said, pressing her other hand upon her heart, and fixing her large black eyes upon the face of her cousin. "My mother came of a race whose members were endowed with a strange gift."

"The gift of SECOND SIGHT," said the artist, recoiling from his cousin with a shiver. "It is the knowledge of your possession of that fatal power which has always made me fear you, Isadora."

"Do not fear *me*," answered the girl; "but fear the danger which I foresee. Do not go to see this man."

"You foresee danger to-night?"

"I do."

"What danger?"

"I cannot tell you. The power has grown less with each generation. I am the last of a long race, and the gift will die with me. I see dark shadows upon the way you are to go this night. Be warned, Hubert; do not leave this house until the shadows are cleared away."

"Pshaw, my poor little cousin, this is folly," said the young man, "and I dare not stay to listen to your terrible warning. You need fear no danger, and at eleven o'clock you shall see me safe at home."

"You promise, Hubert?"

"If I live I will return here at eleven."

"Swear it, cousin," said Isadora, solemnly.

"I swear."

The artist seized Isadora's hand and pressed it in his own; then, hurrying down the staircase, he left the house and hailed a Hansom cab, which was driving slowly along the street.

"Mordaunt's Hotel, Blackfriars," he called to the cabman. "Double fare if you get there by nine o'clock."

Isadora sat, pale and motionless, before the deserted dinner-table. The servant entered the room and removed the cloth, but the young girl never raised her eyes.

For two hours she sat in the same attitude, immovable as a statue; but when the clock upon the chimney-piece struck eleven, she rose from her seat and walked to the window.

She threw aside the damask curtains and looked into the lonely street. A drizzling rain was falling, and the pavement was untrodden by any passer-by.

"Eleven o'clock," murmured Isadora; "the hour has struck, and he has not yet returned. Hubert Monkton never yet broke his oath. My cousin is dead!"

There was something terrible in the

one of conviction with which the girl spoke these words. She seated herself at the window, and, throwing up the sash, leaned her elbow on the sill, and waited.

The rain drifted across her face, the cold wind crept through her hair and fluttered her light garments; but still she waited.

Twelve — one — two — three — four o'clock struck from the turrets of the neighboring churches; but still she waited.

"I am waiting for his corpse," she murmured, as the long night wore away. "I am waiting to receive his corpse, for he will never return alive!"

CHAPTER II.

THE RESTLESS SHADOW.

Upon the night on which Isadora Monkton sat with the rain drifting upon her face, watching for the return of her Cousin Hubert, there were other watchers, — others who passed the weary hours of the long night in sleepless expectancy.

Long after three o'clock had struck from London's countless clocks, a light burned in one of the windows of Lord Templeton's house in Piccadilly, a superb mansion facing the Green Park.

Many a wretched wanderer, shivering in the cold and rain, crouching against the railings of the Park, or hurrying past the palaces of the great, to seek some haunt of vice and poverty in the forgotten nooks and alleys which still abound in London; many a tired foot-passenger, paused to look up at the brilliant light gleaming from this upper window.

Only one bright patch of this light was visible, for the curtains drooping on either side of the broad window left only a narrow space between their folds.

Across this narrow space, across this one bright patch of light, a dark shadow perpetually passed and repassed.

It was the shadow of a woman, tall and elegant, who was pacing up and down, up and down across the lighted window.

A man, crouching against the railings exactly opposite Lord Templeton's mansion, smoked a short clay pipe, and watched this restless shadow passing and repassing, with terrible rapidity, across the patch of light.

This man was one of those mysterious beings who are only to be found in great cities. His garments, which barely protected him from the chilling atmosphere of the autumn night, hung about him in rags, and yet were not the garments of an ordinary beggar. They were rather those of a gentleman reduced to the very lowest stage of shabby gentility.

His battered hat was placed on one side of his head, and gave an air of dismal rakishness to his haggard face, which was, by no means, a common one.

He was pale and fair, —so fair that the delicate hues of his complexion would have been better suited to one of the softer sex, for there was something almost repulsive in the feminine appearance this delicacy of coloring gave to his face.

As a woman he might have been admired; as a man he inspired a feeling of repugnance in those who saw him for the first time.

His hair was bright auburn; red in the shade and yellow in the light. It was of a fine texture, but perfectly straight, and he wore it hanging upon his shoulders, after the manner of a German student.

His features were small and womanish; but the nose, though insignificant in size, was peculiar in shape. It was a sharp aquiline, hooked like the slender beak seen in some of the smaller birds of prey.

His mouth was rosy as that of a young girl, but shaded by a very long mustache of a paler yellow than his hair.

He was of the middle height and very slender. The diminutive size of his hands and feet would have been particular, even in a lady of fashion.

We have given a minute description of this man, for he has an important part to play in the strange history of

secret crime which we are about to relate.

He took his pipe from his lips, and, after knocking out the ashes of his tobacco against the railings, dropped it into his pocket.

He then took a handkerchief from his bosom, and brushed it lightly across his mustache.

Had there been any one near to observe this man, that person would have been surprised to perceive the contrast between this handkerchief and the rags which covered him.

The handkerchief was of white cambric, and so strongly scented, that, as he brushed it across his mustache, a subtle perfume dispersed itself amidst the damp night air,

This perfume was otto of roses, — a fragrance never to be mistaken.

As the man replaced his handkerchief in the pocket of his ragged coat, a wretched woman who was hurrying by paused and looked about her.

"I couldn't surely be mistaken," she muttered.

She stood still, and, looking towards the palings, perceived the man.

"You here, sir!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," he answered, carelessly; — "you know me, it appears?"

"I know the sign, sir," the woman answered, respectfully.

"You have been told?"

"Yes, sir."

"By whom?"

"By a girl who was in great distress, and whom you —"

The man checked her by a hasty gesture of his small hand.

"That will do," he said. "Do you want anything of me?"

The woman hesitated.

"It is a bitter night, sir," she said, after a pause; "a cruel night for those who —"

"For those who are shelterless," said the man, interrupting her. Then, taking a tiny packet from his waistcoat-pocket, he threw it carelessly towards her.

The woman caught it before it could fall to the ground.

"O sir," she exclaimed, "you —"

"Stop!" cried the man; "those who told you of the sign told you something else, — did they not?"

"They did, sir."

"Remember what they told you then, and good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

The woman walked rapidly away, leaving the man still seated opposite to the lighted window.

During their brief interview the restless shadow had never ceased to pass and repass before the patch of light between the festoons of the curtains.

"I have been here an hour," muttered the man, "and that shadow has never once been still. What is it, I wonder? A broken heart, or an evil conscience? It must need one or the other to cause such restlessness as that. Up and down; up and down; never tired; never still! A woman too! That makes it more interesting! I'm fond of other people's secrets, and I know there's a secret here."

He took his pipe from his pocket, refilled it, smoked it out, and threw away the ashes as before.

As he did so the chimes of a neighboring clock pealed the two strokes which told the half-hour.

It was half-past four o'clock.

Five minutes afterwards a cab drove slowly along Piccadilly from the direction of the Regent's Circus, and stopped at the corner of a street, about twenty yards from Lord Templeton's mansion.

A man got out of this cab, paid and dismissed the driver, and stood at the edge of the pavement waiting until the vehicle had disappeared.

Then, after looking about him for a few minutes with considerable caution, he walked to an iron gate before Lord Templeton's house, and, opening this gate with a pass-key, descended a flight of steps leading to the basement of the mansion.

Five minutes afterwards the shadow in the upper window was still, and a second shadow appeared standing by the side of the first.

This second shadow was that of a man.

The man in the ragged coat shrugged his shoulders, and, rising from his seat,

walked slowly towards Hyde Park Corner.

"I was right," he said; "there is a secret!"

. . . . . .

Let us enter the chamber in which the restless figure passes and repasses before the curtained window. Let us look back to the moment when the lonely wanderer sat opposite Lord Templeton's mansion, watching the shadow on the blind.

The chamber is a woman's dressing-room, luxuriously furnished with hangings of pale blue velvet, and a carpet of white velvet pile dotted here and there with bouquets of forget-me-nots and blush roses. The toilet-table is a miracle of artistic elegance; the oval mirror, framed in frosted silver, and supported by exquisitely chiselled figures of the Graces carved in ivory. Perfumed essences in golden bottles are scattered upon the inlaid table; the wax candles burn in girandoles of sparkling crystal, placed at intervals upon the panelled walls. The mantelpiece is of alabaster, carved by the hand of the first sculptor of the day. Up and down this elegant chamber paces a woman whose beauty harmonizes well with the luxury that surrounds her.

That lovely watcher is Lady Blanche Vavasour.

She had returned at half-past one o'clock from a ball given by one of the leaders of fashion, and still wore her ball-dress of floating azure gauze, looped here and there with water-lilies and diamonds. This pale and cloud-like dress gave her the appearance of some beautiful water-nymph newly emerged from her crystal fountain.

Her long yellow hair had fallen loosely over her shoulders, and hung about her waist like a shower of golden rain. Her face was as pale as the faces of the alabaster statues which supported the chimney-piece of her apartment. Her large blue eyes were unnaturally dilated, and shone with a feverish light.

Sometimes she clasped her small jewelled hands and lifted them wildly above her head; sometimes her slender fingers twined themselves convulsively amid that bright shower of golden hair as if she would have torn the sunny tresses from their roots.

"Will he never come?" she cried, again and again. "Is this suspense to last forever?"

Every now and then she paused, for one brief instant, to look eagerly at the hands of the enamelled clock upon the chimney-piece, and then with an impatient gesture resumed her weary walk.

At last, exactly as the hands of the timepiece pointed to twenty minutes before five, a cautious knock sounded upon the panel of the gilded door.

"At last!" she exclaimed, "at last!"

She sprang towards the door and unlocked it almost noiselessly; then, opening it with the same caution, she admitted a man wrapped in a heavy great-coat, and with his chin muffled in a cashmere shawl.

This man stood near the doorway with his hat in his hand, as if waiting for Lady Blanche to speak.

Cold as the night was, heavy drops of perspiration rolled down his swarthy face, and his breath came short and quick as if he had been running.

"Well!" exclaimed Lady Blanche; "well!"

The man hesitated for some moments, twisting the brim of his hat round and round in his trembling hands, and staring vacantly straight before him.

Then, with visible effort and without looking at Lady Blanche, he said slowly:—

"I've done everything, my Lady, according as you arranged."

Lady Blanche Vavasour drew herself up to her fullest height, and a glance of mingled joy and triumph shot across her expressive countenance.

"I *am very glad!*" she said.

There was something almost terrible in the slow deliberation with which she pronounced these few words.

"You have done me a great service," she added, after a long pause, during which she had seated herself in a thoughtful attitude before the costly toilet-table, "you have done me a great service, Philip, and I will not forget my promise."

She unlocked her dressing-case, which was a massive casket of ebony inlaid with gold. She pressed a spring in the inner part of the casket, and a secret drawer flew out, disclosing a few neatly folded papers and a roll of bank notes.

Lady Blanche took out the roll of notes and handed to the man.

"Take this, Philip," she said. "It was to have paid for my wedding-dresses, but Howell and James must give me credit for those. Who would imagine, to look at this room, that there is no one in all this great city more in need of money than the Earl of Templeton? But what of that?" she added, with a sudden change of tone. "Give me the packet, Philip, the packet!"

The man recoiled a few paces.

"I'm very sorry, my Lady," he answered, looking down, as if afraid to meet the eyes of the beautiful creature before him, "I'm very sorry, but I couldn't get that!"

"You have not brought me the packet I told you of?"

"No, my Lady."

"He hadn't it about him, then?"

"No, my Lady."

"And yet you —"

"I did as you directed, my Lady," replied the man, "because by his words and his manner I fancied he had the packet as you wanted about him, and I offered him what you told me if he'd give it up, but he wouldn't; so I told him what you said, and that there was only one course left, and then —"

She stopped him with an imperious gesture of her small hand.

"Enough," she said; "you did as I told you?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"To the letter?"

"To the letter, my Lady," answered the man, still looking down.

"You may go."

She waved her hand haughtily, and the man crept towards the door.

"Stop!" she exclaimed. "Come back; I have something more to say!"

The man returned, and stood awaiting her pleasure as before.

"I have said nothing to you," she *murmured*, slowly, "of keeping the *secret of this night's business*. I have asked no oath from you, for I know that such as you break your oaths as lightly as you take them. You have been well paid for what you have done, — have you not?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"And it was done of your own free will?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"You will keep your secret then, remember, for your own sake, not for mine. Tell it, to-morrow, in a crowded court of justice, and you will do *me* no injury. What evidence can you produce which will prove that I had any interest in that which has been done to-night? None! You would be laughed at as a maniac, or punished as a slanderer. Remember this and be silent; but remember, also, that it is your safety which depends upon that silence, and not mine! You understand me?"

"Yes, my Lady," answered the man, lifting his eyes for the first time and looking Lady Blanche full in the face, "I understand you perfectly now; and shan't forget a word that you've said."

The eyes which gazed so steadfastly into the lovely face of Blanche Vavasour were not pleasant eyes to look at. There was no fault in either their color or their shape, but they were entirely without light; they were like the eyes of a blind mind, and yet you felt that those dull and rayless orbs possessed as much power to see as the brightest which ever illumined the human countenance.

"Go, then," said Lady Blanche, coldly, "since you understand. Yet stay, Philip, one word more. On my marriage you will leave my father's service, and enter that of the duke. You will be better paid than you have been here."

The man bowed low.

"You are very good, my Lady," he said.

"I want no thanks; go!"

She followed the servant to the door, and closed and locked it as noiselessly as she opened it. Then, returning to her toilet-table, she threw herself into the chair before the glass, and gazed at herself half wonderingly in the mirror.

The face at which she looked was very beautiful in the soft light of the

wax candles. The blue eyes were no longer dilated, a soft rosy tint illumined the alabaster face, and the crimson lips wore a smile of triumph.

"The duke will never see the traces of to-night's business in my face to-morrow," she said; "I am safe now."

She walked to the window and flung apart the heavy curtains, lifted the sash, and looked out into the street beneath.

The gray shadows of the cold, early dawn rested upon the dark tree-tops in the park; the same pale shadows hovered by the railings opposite to Lady Blanche Vavasour's window, and within those railings beneath the trees stood another shadow paler than the rest.

It was the shadow of a woman clad in white garments. A phantom-like form standing between the dark trunks of two large trees, exactly opposite Lord Templeton's mansion.

Lady Blanche recoiled from the window, and, with a smothered shriek, fell heavily to the ground. As she did so, the White Phantom glided slowly away.

CHAPTER III.

SEBASTIAN CONTES.

On the same morning upon which Lady Blanche Vavasour beheld the shadowy form whose mystical appearance struck terror to her heart, a young man strolled up and down the sandy shore before a little fishing-village in Sussex.

This young man was shabbily dressed; but the clothes which he wore were those of a gentleman, and his manner of wearing them bore the impress of a noble origin.

His dark, thoughtful face was not perhaps handsome; but the features were massive and regular, the expression haughty, but noble. His skin was of that olive tint which tells of Southern blood, and his eyes had the sombre darkness peculiar to the Spaniard.

Sebastian Contes was a native of Madrid, but he was no stranger to England, where he had exercised his profession as a sculptor for some years, and had won much notice from the patrons of art. It was while pursuing his vocation in London that he became acquainted with Hubert Monkton and his Cousin Isadora, both, like himself, orphans and artists.

This acquaintance had rapidly grown into a friendship; for Hubert Monkton admired the genius and enthusiasm of the young sculptor, and Isadora's heart warmed to one who was a native of the sunny South, which had been her mother's home.

Sebastian Contes had met with a misfortune which for a time overshadowed his life, but which to a rich man would have been of little consequence.

The steamer in which he had travelled from Cadiz to England had been wrecked upon the coast of Sussex, without loss of life, but with the utter loss of the vessel and all the property on board her.

Amongst other treasures, which had been engulfed by the ocean, were two marble busts, upon which the sculptor had expended the patient labor of six months, and a desk containing upwards of a hundred pounds,—all the money he possessed in the world.

He found himself, therefore, in that wretched fishing-village utterly penniless, and dependent upon the charity of one of the fishermen who had manned the life-boat in which the passengers and crew of the Spanish vessel had been saved, during the time that must elapse before he could receive any help from his friends in Spain.

The fisherman was as rough in his manners as a backwoodsman; but he had a brave and generous heart, and he felt for the young traveller.

"Stay here as long as you like, mounseer," he said; "the fare's uncommon rough, I know, but you're welcome to it such as it is. Never mind the old woman; she's got a temper of her own, I know; but don't you take any notice of that. Make yourself at home, mounseer, and make yourself happy if you can in such a hovel as ourn."

"The old woman" was the fisherman's wife, who was a terrible termagant, and who objected strongly to the

young Spaniard's living at free quarters in her miserable abode.

Upon this particular morning, about four days after the wreck, Sebastian Contes had strolled out upon the beach to ponder gloomily upon his position, which was at best but a dreary one.

He had lost the result of his labor, and he had lost the small sum which his professional earnings had enabled him to save. The money he expected from Madrid would be only a loan, which it would be his bounden duty to repay.

He had been in every way a loser, for on the night of the shipwreck he had barely had time to hurry on his clothes, and he had left a valuable gold watch in his cabin.

After strolling up and down the low, sandy shore for upwards of an hour he returned to the fisherman's cottage, as early sunshine glanced coldly upon the white surf which rolled along the beach. He paused upon the threshold, arrested by the sound of the old woman's voice in tones of angry altercation; but with a careless shrug of his shoulders he walked into the cottage and seated himself in a despondent attitude at the rough deal table.

He was so wrapped in his own gloomy thoughts that it was some time before he became aware that he himself was the cause of the dispute.

"I don't care," shrieked the woman, brandishing a heavy fire shovel in her brawny hand; "I won't stand no more such nonsense about friends in Spain sending the money. Why haven't they sent it before this if they mean to send it? I'm not going to be eaten out of house and home by any penniless swindlers; and if you don't clear the place of him, I will."

"Hold hard, old woman," said the fisherman; "don't you see mounseer's come in? It aint manners to talk like this before the poor gentleman. I'm sure he's welcome to the bit of vittals he eats; it aint very much that you should make such a noise about it."

"Stop, my good friend," interrupted Sebastian, rising and interposing between the disputants; "your wife shall be satisfied. I am not without friends in England who are willing to trust my honor and believe in my hone Give me a pen and ink and a shee paper, and I will write a letter wl will bring me some money by return post."

There is that in the accents of tr which carries conviction to the m outrageous. The old woman hung head, abashed by the indignant p of Sebastian.

"I tell 'e, sir, I never doubted exclaimed the old man; "never m my old woman; she's a bit of a tart

"I shall never forget your kind l pitality, my dear friend," said Sel tian, grasping the fisherman's ha "but I must insist upon writing letter."

The letter was written, and addres to Miss Isadora Monkton.

Strange that so slight and insig cant a circumstance as this old wom anger should be the means of forgin link in the long chain of events wl has yet to be unwound.

CHAPTER IV.

ISADORA AND LADY BLANCHE.

Sebastian Contes did not wait l for a reply from the friend to whom had appealed in his hour of distr The return of post brought him a le from Isadora Monkton, enclosing a t pound note.

The letter itself was brief. It c contained these words:—

"Dear Sebastian,—Come to me im diately. I am in terrible need of your h

"Ever yours,

"Isadora Monkton

Sebastian Contes lost no time in sponding to this summons. Imm ately on the receipt of the letter, paid the fisherman for his hospit shelter, and hurried off to the nea railway station.

He had some miles to walk befor reached this station, and when he reach it, he had upwards of an hou wait for the London train.

He had, therefore, ample leisure

"You wish to see *him*, then?" said Philip.

"I do."

"Then you *shall* see him, and from his lips you shall hear that I have spoken the truth. But you cannot see him until to-night. There would be danger to both in that place before dark."

Lady Blanche shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"Let it be so, then," she said. "To-night, after dark."

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS SUMMONS.

THE London season had long been over, but there were still some of fashion's votaries who lingered in town.

Amongst these was the Duke of Arlington.

His Grace, Gerald Plantagenet Mortimer, Duke of Arlington, was a man of about forty years of age; that is to say, in the fairest and fullest period of man's life. An accomplished gentleman, a statesman, and a soldier, Gerald Mortimer was one of those men who add a modern lustre to the splendor of an ancient name. It was little wonder, then, that he should be proud; not with the paltry pride of the purse-proud parvenu, but with the noble sentiment of a high-born gentleman, who scorned a mean or dishonorable action.

He had reached the age of forty without having married, because he had never met with any woman whom he considered worthy to wear the strawberry-leaved coronet which had last encircled the proud brow of his idolized mother.

But in Lady Blanche Vavasour he thought that he beheld all that was perfect in woman, — youth, beauty, innocence, candor, truth, — all that can make even the highest rank yet more elevated by adding to it the inherent nobility of virtue.

He believed this, and he made an offer of his hand to her, who was already mistress of his heart.

He was *accepted*, and he believed that he was also loved. He little knew how seldom the heart goes with the hand amongst the hot-house flowers of the world, — the artificially cultivated beauties of fashionable life.

The soft blue eyes met his with a loving light in their azure depths. The rosy lips were parted in a gentle smile. Was it possible he could look for deceit in such a face?

The duke spent much of his time at Lord Templeton's mansion in Piccadilly. He was a privileged visitor at all hours; for the earl, who had long seen ruin staring him in the face, was only too glad to welcome this wealthy son-in-law.

Upon the night of the 16th of October — the night succeeding the day upon which the interview we have described in the preceding chapter had taken place between Lady Blanche Vavasour and Isadora Monkton — the duke dined alone at his club, and sat over his untasted wine, thinking of the future which lay before him, until the clock struck nine. He looked up as the sound met his ear, and counted the silvery strokes of the timepiece in the club-room.

"Nine o'clock," he said; "I thought it was later. I will stroll up St. James Street and call upon Templeton. Blanche was out when I called this morning, but I am sure to find them at home to-night, for there are no parties in this deserted city." He put on his hat and left the club-house.

He was doomed to disappointment; for when he reached Lord Templeton's house he was informed by the servants that Lady Blanche had complained of a headache, and had retired to rest a little before nine o'clock. The earl was alone in the library.

The duke turned away with a sigh.

"Tell his lordship that I will call to-morrow," he said, as he quitted the house, disheartened by his disappointment.

He had left his carriage at the door of the club-house, and returning to St. James Street he told his coachman to drive him to Drury Lane Theatre.

"I do not know what is the matter with me to-night," he muttered, as he threw himself back on the purple cloth

cushions of his luxurious equipage; "I feel a restlessness which I cannot overcome. I am going to this theatre from no fancy for the entertainment it can afford, but for the necessity of doing something."

As the Duke of Arlington's carriage drove from the club-house, a man, who had been standing for some time in the shadow of the portico, strolled slowly away in an opposite direction.

The performances at Drury Lane were not over until after eleven o'clock; but the Duke of Arlington grew weary of the entertainment, and left the house a little before the hour struck. He found the space before the theatre almost entirely deserted, except by his own carriage, and a gentleman and two ladies, who were waiting for a cab.

The night was dull and foggy, and the lamps before the theatre struggled vainly with the mist.

As he was about to step into his carriage a hand was laid upon his arm, and, turning round, he found himself face to face with a woman.

This woman was dressed in tattered garments, her figure concealed by a ragged shawl, and her head covered with a cotton handkerchief, which was tied under her chin.

"I want to speak to your Grace," she said, quietly.

The duke put his hand in his pocket, and was about to draw out his purse, but the woman seemed to divine his intention.

"It is not your money that I want," she said; "I am sent here by some one who would speak to you upon a subject that is very dear to your heart. If you value the name of your unsullied race, follow me!"

"But who are you, and where would you take me?" exclaimed the duke.

"If you value the name of your unsullied race, follow me!" repeated the woman in exactly the same tone as before. "She who sent me to seek you bade me say that, and nothing more."

"It was a woman, then, who sent you?"

"It was,"

The duke paused for a moment. *What if* this mysterious summons should concern Lady Blanche Vavasour? That thought was enough.

"I will follow you," he said.

CHAPTER VI.

MIDNIGHT UPON THE SIXTEENTH OF OCTOBER.

Two strange scenes were enacted in the city of London upon the night of the 16th of October.

Let us follow the Duke of Arlington and the woman who met him before the theatre.

The woman turned sharply to the right, after leaving the portico, and traversed the street by the side of the theatre, the duke following her closely, but not attempting to address her.

Even at that late hour of the evening, this busy thoroughfare was still crowded with the poorer and rougher orders of the population.

The duke and his strange companion were not, therefore, observed. After crossing Drury Lane, in the direction of Clare Market, the woman turned into a narrow alley.

The aspect of this alley was utterly different to that of the thoroughfare they had just left.

Here all was dark and still. The sloping roofs of old rickety houses nearly touched each other; the strip of sky between the tumble-down habitations seemed as narrow as a ribbon. No sound issued from the closed doors; no lights burned in the dingy windows.

The woman paused in this dismal alley, and for the first time since they had left the theatre she addressed the duke.

"This is the place to which I was told to bring you," she said.

"Here!" exclaimed the nobleman. "How, in Heaven's name, can I be wanted here?"

"It is all dark, is it not?" answered the woman, in a low voice. "Wait and watch!"

She clapped her hands three times. At the third stroke a light appeared in

a garret window of the house beneath which they were standing.

This light revealed a shadowy white figure, — the figure of a woman holding a candle above her head.

"They are ready for us," said the woman; "we are expected. Follow me."

She beckoned to the duke, and was about to enter the house in which the light had just appeared, when he laid his hand upon her arm and arrested her footsteps.

"Why would you have me enter this house?" he asked. "How do I know what vile plot may not lurk at the bottom of all this foolish mystery? How do I know who may be waiting for me in that house, if I should be weak enough to fall into the trap that has been set for me?"

"What do you fear?" said the woman, scornfully. "Violence, robbery, murder, perhaps. You think this house is occupied by thieves, who would decoy you into their den in order to strip you of all the valuables you carry, and then destroy you. That is done often enough in this city, perhaps, but it is not to be done in this house to-night. If you suspect such treachery, go back to where you left your carriage, and place your watch and purse in the custody of your servants, and then return here. I will wait for you patiently."

"No!" exclaimed the duke; "whatever danger there may be, I will encounter it boldly. But you can at least tell me why I am summoned?"

"I can tell you nothing beyond that which I was ordered to tell you. 'If you value the name of your unsullied race, follow me!'"

"That is what you were told to say?"

"It is."

"Lead the way, then; for the honor of my race I would willingly follow you, though I knew that you were leading me into the jaws of death."

"Come, then, and come without fear," answered the woman.

She took a key from her pocket and opened the door of the house. The duke followed her along a narrow passage and up four flights of dark tumble-down stairs.

At the top of the fourth flight a light shone through a wide crevice at the bottom of a door.

The woman knocked softly at this door, and, as she did so, the light within was suddenly extinguished.

"Come in," said a low voice within the apartment.

The woman opened the door and motioned to the duke to enter; as he crossed the threshold she drew back and closed the door upon him. The next moment he could hear her footsteps as she slowly descended the staircase.

He was alone then, — alone with the occupant of this darkened chamber. For the first few moments he was unable to distinguish any object in the obscurity, but as his eyes became presently more accustomed to the semi-darkness, he perceived that he was in a garret-chamber, poorly furnished, and only lighted by the dim patch of sky visible through the open window.

Near this window a figure was seated, — a female figure robed in white; but so shadowy and impalpable, that it was almost difficult to believe that the being upon which the duke looked was of human clay.

Brave as the nobleman was, the aspect of this phantom-like form sent a sudden chill through his heart. He recoiled a few paces, and laid his hand upon the lock of the door behind him.

"Do not fear me!" said a low voice; "it is I who have summoned you hither."

"For what purpose?"

"That you may hear your fortune told!" answered the white figure.

"What juggling folly is this!" exclaimed the duke, indignantly.

"It is neither juggling nor folly, my Lord Duke," replied the voice, solemnly; "it is a link in the long chain of mystery which entwines the inner secrets of men's lives. If you are brought here in the darkness to hear a speaker whose face you may not see, it is because you have something to learn, but are not yet to know who it is who reveals to you the horrible truth!"

"The horrible truth!" exclaimed the duke; "what truth?"

"The truth which may perhaps cast

a shadow upon your life," answered the unseen speaker. "You love, — do you not? You love the woman whom you have promised to wed?"

"What do you know of this?" asked the duke, haughtily.

"Do not question, but answer me, if you would know that which I have to tell. You love this woman, — do you not? You love Lady Blanche Vavasour?"

"You know her, then?" exclaimed the duke.

"Better than you do. Once more, I ask, do you love her?"

"Passionately, devotedly!"

"So passionately and devotedly that you would sacrifice for her sake the honor of your race?"

"No," cried the duke, with sudden energy. "No, a thousand times no! I would sacrifice my life, but not the honor of my race, for that is not mine to give, — it is a sacred heritage which belongs alike to my dead forefathers and my children yet unborn."

"You would not sacrifice your honor, then, to your love for Lady Blanche Vavasour?"

"No!" replied the duke. "But why do you ask me this?"

"Because I know the woman you love better than you know her. He who marries Blanche Vavasour will marry a woman whose soul is stained with guilt!"

"It is false!" exclaimed the duke, springing towards the shadowy figure.

The white-robed woman lifted her hand with a warning gesture.

"One step nearer and I am gone," she said, solemnly. "One step nearer and I leave you, — leave you to your ignorant worship of a worthless woman."

"A worthless woman!"

"Yes. A woman whose soul is black with hidden crime, — who hides beneath the innocent beauty of an angel's face the dark spirit of a fiend, — whose outer life is false as the shadows we see in a glass, — a traitress, false alike to love and honor."

"Of what crime do you accuse her?" gasped the duke.

"Of the worst crime!"

"And that is—"

"Murder!

"Liar!" cried Gerald Mortimer. "Base and infamous liar, I will wring the foul accusations from your false throat!"

As he said this he darted forward as if he would have seized the shadowy figure in his powerful grasp.

The woman rose as he advanced, and, receding from him for a few paces, suddenly disappeared in the darkness.

The duke looked about him in utter bewilderment. The room was empty, but the figure had disappeared in an opposite direction to that of the door through which the Duke had entered.

He felt with his hands around the rough wooden panelling of the chamber; but he could discover no other door.

"She must have disappeared through some sliding panel," he muttered, after abandoning his fruitless search. "Who is this woman? Some enemy of Blanche, who has concocted this villanous plot against her."

He waited for some time, listening to every sound, thinking that the woman would, perhaps, return; but he waited in vain.

After nearly an hour wasted thus, he opened the door and groped his way slowly down the steep, narrow staircase.

He was surprised by the silence of the house; not a breath seemed to stir in the dreary dwelling. The doors were all closed, but at the foot of the stairs he stopped and called aloud.

No one answered his summons.

He found the street door ajar, and, pushing it open, emerged once more into the alley.

Looking back at the windows of the house he perceived a rotten-looking board hanging before them.

This board announced that the dismal habitation was to let. It is scarcely possible to describe the strange revulsion of feeling which the duke experienced as he discovered this.

"An empty house!" he exclaimed. "Who, then, was that white-robed woman? Who, then, was that shadowy and phantom form which receded from my grasp?" An icy thrill of horror crept through him as he asked himself this question.

He looked anxiously about him, and

perceived that there was a faint glimmer of light above the door of a house next to the empty one he had just left.

He knocked at this door, and waited eagerly for an answer.

"The people here have not yet gone to bed," he muttered; "they may be able to tell me something of the next house."

The door was opened by a young man dressed in a suit of shabby black, who looked rather suspiciously at his late visitor.

"Pardon my intrusion," said the duke, with the polished courtesy peculiar to him. "I should not have disturbed you at so late an hour, but I wish particularly to obtain some information respecting the next house, and I thought that you would most likely be able to give it. Any remuneration for your trouble," added the duke, hesitating, "which you might wish, I shall be most happy to pay."

"Pray walk in, sir," said the young man, interrupting the duke; "it is no great favor to tell you what little I know respecting the next house. Pray come in. Alice, bring a light," he added, speaking to some one within.

A girl came from a room at the back, carrying a candle. She was young and rather pretty, but she looked ill and careworn.

The duke entered the house, and found himself in a small chemist's shop, dark and dirty, and very poorly stocked with the usual bottles and jars.

"This is not a very bright place for business," the young man said, half apologetically, as he watched the duke's hurried glance around the shop; "but we do the best we can."

He took the candle from the girl's hand, and lighted a small jet of gas by the side of the counter.

By this light the duke perceived that he was thin and pale, but good-looking, with restless dark eyes, and a nervous twitching at the mouth, which never seemed still.

"You want to know about the next house, sir?" he said.

"Yes; I want to know if it is empty?"

"Quite empty."

"No one in charge of it?"

"No one."

"Indeed!" said the duke. "Have you ever seen any strangers enter it, — to-night, for instance?"

"Never, sir."

"Strange!" murmured the duke, "strange!"

He rose to leave the shop, and, as he did so, he perceived that the girl was watching him intently. As he caught her eyes she colored suddenly and looked away.

"Perhaps this girl knows something of the mystery," he thought.

"You have heard something, perhaps?" he said, addressing her.

"Nothing, sir," she answered, looking at the young chemist rather than at her questioner.

"My wife is a poor nervous creature," said the young man. "If a mouse stirred she would thing it was a ghost."

"Your wife!" exclaimed the duke. "A young wife and a young husband to fight the battle of life together. Forgive me if I say that you do not seem very rich."

"No, indeed," said the young man, bitterly.

"I may, perhaps, be of some use to you. You look clever, and this is scarcely the place for a clever man. Call on me in a few days at this address; and if, in the mean time, you can gather any new information respecting the next house, I shall be obliged to you."

He handed his card to the chemist and left the shop.

When he was gone, the young man read the name upon the card, while the girl looked timidly over his shoulder.

"The Duke of Arlington!" he exclaimed. "The mystery grows darker every hour."

CHAPTER VII.

THE RAVEN, BLACKFRIARS.

Upon the night of the 16th of October, Lady Blanche Vavasour retired early to her own apartment, complaining of a headache. Her maid, a French woman, called Louison Mardel,

assisted her to undress, and drew the silken curtains round her ladyship's luxurious couch.

She offered to sit up with her mistress, or read her to sleep; but Lady Blanche dismissed her.

"You are very good, Louison," she said, with that affable gentleness which characterized her manner; "but I am not very ill; rest is all I require."

Louison Mardel placed the shaded night-lamp upon its alabaster stand, and softly left the room.

No sooner had she done thus than the silken curtains were dashed aside by two small white hands, and Lady Blanche sprang from her couch.

"It is impossible to rest!" she exclaimed; "I can take no repose until I know all. How long the hours are, and how many weary moments must pass between this and midnight!"

She took the night-lamp from its pedestal and passed into the adjoining apartment, which was the dressing-room, in which she had received the man, called Philip, upon the night of the 13th of October. She locked the door of the chamber, lighted the wax tapers upon the toilet-table, and seated herself before the looking-glass. She unlocked a small casket, which, among other elegant and costly trinkets, adorned her dressing-table. From this casket she took a small bottle, containing a dark but transparent fluid, which she poured into a tiny crystal basin. Then, with her two slender hands, she pushed her rich golden hair away from her forehead, and, twisting it into one tight knot, fastened it at the back of her head.

"Now for a transformation!" she murmured, as she contemplated herself in the glass.

She dipped a sponge into the dark fluid in the crystal basin, and passed this wet sponge lightly over her beautiful face. As she did so, her delicate skin changed from the hue of alabaster to a dark sallow tint,—such as is generally seen in the complexion of a West Indian. When she had completed this change, she opened a drawer in her toilet-table and took from it a wig of wavy black hair. She drew this wig over her own yellow tresses, and fixed it firmly upon her head. This change in the color of her hair and complexion made her an utterly different being from the lovely Lady Blanche, whose beauty had made her the belle of the previous season.

With a camel's-hair pencil she painted her eyebrows and lashes of the same hue as the false hair; then, rising from the toilet-table, she went to a wardrobe, from which she took some shabby garments of rusty mourning. She dressed herself carefully in these garments, amongst which there was a widow's cap.

When her toilet was complete, she examined herself from head to foot in a large chéval glass.

"My father would pass me in the street without recognizing me," she murmured.

A fire burned in her bedroom. She returned to this apartment, leaving the door of the dressing-room open, and seated herself close to the hearth.

"It is cold," she muttered, "and I shiver; but I do not fear. I will go through with it to the end. What if I beheld a white shadow in the sickly morning light? Even *his* shadow should not turn me from my purpose."

The ormolu timepiece in the adjoining room struck ten.

"Two hours to wait," murmured Lady Blanche.

She listened to all the noises in the large house. She heard every step in the corridors and upon the staircase without, as the family retired to rest. Before eleven o'clock all was still.

A little after eleven a cautious hand knocked at the door of the dressing-room.

Lady Blanche flew to respond to that mysterious summons. She opened the door, admitted the servant Philip; but the man recoiled as he looked at her altered face.

"What is this?" he exclaimed, "and where is Lady Blanche?"

She laughed a low, silvery laugh and put her finger on her lip.

"My disguise must be, indeed, complete," she said. "I am ready. Is all safe?"

"Quite safe, my Lady. The servants have been in bed half an hour."

"And my father?"

"The earl went to his room at ten o'clock."

"Lead the way then," answered Lady Blanche. "I am ready."

She fastened the door of her bedroom upon the inside, but she removed the key of her dressing-room door and locked it upon the outside, afterwards placing the key in her pocket.

The servant Philip walked before her along the carpeted corridor, till he stopped before a small door. This door opened upon the servants' staircase, which they both descended.

At the foot of this staircase they found themselves in a narrow stone passage, through which they passed into a small square yard, also paved with stone, and so closed in by high stone walls as to resemble a square dungeon with the roof off. In one of the stone walls there was a low, wooden door which opened into a narrow street, at the back of Piccadilly.

Philip locked this door behind him, after having passed out into the street with Lady Blanche.

"I have lived for years in that house," murmured the lady, "but I never knew of this back entrance until to-night."

"It is intended for the servants," answered the man; "but we seldom use it, as the area entrance is much more convenient."

This man did not speak like an ordinary servant. His pronunciation was correct, and he had none of the cockneyisms common to Londoners. He spoke like a person who had been tolerably educated. He conducted Lady Blanche through two or three narrow streets, all lying parallel with Piccadilly, until they came to a cab-stand, upon which two or three vehicles, which did night duty, were stationed. He selected the plainest and darkest of these; and, after having given some directions to the driver, opened the door and handed Lady Blanche into the vehicle. He then took his place upon the box beside the cabman.

The man drove through Coventry Street and Leicester Square, thence to Long Acre, from Long Acre into Holborn, and from Holborn to Blackfriars Bridge. He crossed the bridge, and turned out of the Blackfriars road into a narrow street, where he stopped, at the direction of Philip Howland, the servant.

This man opened the door of the vehicle, and assisted Lady Blanche to alight upon the dirty pavement.

"We will walk the rest of the way to your sick brother's house," he said, in a voice which was loud enough to be heard by the driver. "The cab will wait for us here."

He paid the cabman his fare from Piccadilly.

"You will wait here for an hour," he said, "and you will be well paid for your time. Now, madam," he added, offering his arm to Lady Blanche.

She accepted his offered arm with an ill-concealed shudder.

That shudder was not lost upon Philip Howland.

"You are very proud, madam," he said, in a low, deliberate tone; "but you are obliged to accept my aid, and for the time we are equals."

He turned into a dark, narrow court, which wound sinuously, like some brick-and-mortar serpent, behind the dismal streets leading down to the Thames.

The air was stifling and pestiferous. The dark roofs of the houses in this close alley nearly touched each other. The buildings were shabby and dilapidated; but, late as it was, lights burned here and there in the dingy windows.

Philip Howland stopped suddenly before a flight of broken stone steps, leading down to a low doorway sunk deeply in the earth. Some distance above this doorway hung a blackened and dirty sign, upon which was inscribed in large black letters:—

"THE RAVEN,
ELIZABETH HEPWELL."

"This is the house," he said; "follow me."

Lady Blanche Vavasour drew back with a gesture of terror. "I am afraid," she said.

The man answered with a sneering laugh.

"You were not afraid of what was done here," he said; "you should not,

therefore, fear to cross the threshold. You doubted me, and you would be convinced. You shall hear him!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GAMBIA, THE INDIAN.

The noise of several loud, clamorous voices and hoarse peals of laughter sounded upon the ears of Lady Blanche Vavasour, as she descended the rugged stone steps leading down to the sunken doorway of the Raven.

At the door Philip Howland paused, and knocked five knocks, each distinct and separate from the others.

The door was opened cautiously, and a wizen, wrinkled face peeped out of the narrow aperture.

In the obscurity of the place it was impossible to discover whether this face belonged to a man or a woman.

"Who is it?" asked a cracked treble voice.

"The Dandy," answered Philip Howland, in a louder key.

A burst of hoarse laughter from within greeted this announcement.

"Let him in!" cried a deep voice,—a voice which once heard was not easily forgotten. "Let him in; we'll see the Dandy. Let him in, Mother Bess."

The door was opened to its full width, revealing a narrow passage, the brick floor of which was sanded.

Several doors, all low and narrow, opened into this passage.

Philip Howland crossed the threshold, followed by Lady Blanche; but the old hag, who stood within the shadow of the open door, stretched out her skinny and claw-like hand, and grasped the slender wrist of the elegant daughter of Lord Templeton.

"Stop a bit!" she exclaimed, "this won't do; the Dandy isn't alone."

"It's only my sister," said Philip, carelessly. "You can't have any objection to my giving my sister a drop of brandy to keep the cold out. She's chilled to the bone, poor thing, for we've been out all the evening."

"On the lay?" asked the old woman, eagerly.

"Never you mind," said Philip, with a gesture of impatience; "will you let her in?—Yes or No. If you won't, I know another public, within fifty yards, where I can get a drop of spirit without all this questioning; and rather a more respectable establishment, too, for the matter of that."

"Let the Dandy's sister in, can't you, Mother Bess?" cried the same deep voice, from one of the rooms leading out of the passage. "Let her in; she's to be trusted, I dare say."

"She is, Gambia!" said Philip Howland, replying to this unseen speaker; "she is to be trusted to the last round of the ladder that leads to the gallows."

"Bravo!" cried a chorus of voices; "the Dandy's sister's one of the right sort!"

The woman who had been addressed as Mother Bess, released her grasp of Lady Blanche's wrist; and then, bending forward until her skinny face nearly touched that of Lady Blanche, she said, in a hissing whisper, "If I thought you meant mischief, I'd squeeze the last breath out of that slender throat of yours with my own strong hand before I'd let you cross this threshold."

The face which looked into that of Lady Blanche was the face of a woman of nearly eighty years of age; so withered and wrinkled that it would have been scarcely possible to have found room for another line amongst the seams and creases which traversed the hag's wizened countenance. The nose was hooked like the beak of a bird of prey, and the pointed chin was adorned with shaggy tufts of white hair. The small eyes were of a grayish-green, and had something of that glassy, unnatural brightness peculiar to the eyes of the cat. The hag was dressed in garments of the fashion of some thirty years before the period of which we write; but these garments, though outlandish in make, were costly in texture; and it was to be observed that a double eye-glass, which hung from a massive gold chain round the withered throat of the old woman, was set with brilliants.

"I'll take my sister into Number Four, if you've no objection, Mother Bess," said Philip Howland; "she's a little bit of a lady in her way, and

she won't much relish your rough customers."

He led the way into one of the further rooms opening out of the passage, Lady Blanche following him.

The room into which he conducted the earl's daughter was a low, cellar-like apartment, the walls of which were lined with rough wooden panels, painted of a dark color, to represent oak. The ceiling was crossed by heavy wooden beams, between which the bare rafters were visible. A handful of coals burned in a little iron basket, upon the old-fashioned open hearth, and a flaring tallow candle guttered in a battered brass candlestick upon the rough oaken table which stood in the centre of the room. A few dilapidated chairs, of different shapes and sizes, formed the rest of the furniture; but the panelled walls were adorned with handbills offering rewards for the apprehension of different criminals, and for the discovery of the authors of such undetected crimes as had recently been committed.

These handbills Mrs. Elizabeth Hepwell called her pictures. Philip Howland closed the door of this room, but remained standing near it, with his hand upon the lock, as if to prevent the entrance of any intruder.

"Merciful Heaven, what a horrible den!" exclaimed Lady Blanche, looking round the room with a shudder.

The servant smiled a strange, sardonic smile.

"It is by no means a superb apartment, certainly, my Lady," he said, "but it was in the next room to this that—"

Lady Blanche Vavasour clasped her two small hands over her face, as if she would have shut out both sight and hearing.

"Shall I tell you what was done in the next room, my Lady?" asked Philip Howland.

She made no reply.

"You will hear *him* presently," said the servant; "you are slow of belief, and you might doubt me; but I think you will believe *him!*"

Lady Blanche shuddered.

"Come what may," she said, "I must be satisfied. I cannot endure this wretched suspense. I must know that I have not been juggled with."

"You shall know it from *his* lips, my Lady," answered Philip Howland. "Look at the wall before you," he added, pointing with his left hand to the wooden panelling, while with his right he still held the handle of the door.

Lady Blanche followed with her eyes the hand which pointed to one particular panel.

"You see that square patch of wood-work in the panel," said Philip Howland, in a cautious whisper; "that piece of wood is on a slide, and can be removed easily by your hand. When the wood-work is pushed aside, nothing remains between this chamber and the next but a partition of painted canvas. With your ear close to that canvas you can hear every syllable that is uttered in the adjoining apartment. You understand?"

"Perfectly," answered Lady Blanche.

"Good! The secret of this opening in the wall is, as I believe, known only to two persons, Mother Bess, the landlady of this house, and myself. I discovered it by accident, and Mother Bess has no idea that I know of it, or she would not allow us to be in this room. The next chamber to this is rarely used; it is called Number Five, and it was in that room that—"

"Enough, enough!" exclaimed Lady Blanche Vavasour, stretching out her hands entreatingly to the servant, who seemed to take a fiendish delight in beholding her agony.

"You will wait here, my Lady," he said, with that strange intermixture of respect and command with which he always addressed his mistress, "you will wait here until you hear footsteps in the adjoining apartment; when you do so, remove the sliding square of wood-work and listen."

He opened the door and left the room. Lady Blanche Vavasour seated herself near the table, with her head resting on her hand, and her elbow upon the rough wooden arm of the clumsy chair in which she sat.

Mother Bess entered the apartment with a glass of some steaming liquor in her hand.

"Here, my dear," said the old woman, addressing Lady Blanche; "here's a jorum of brandy and water; hot and strong, as we ladies always like it, my love," added the hag, in an insinuating tone. "Toss it off, my beauty; it will do you good."

Lady Blanche Vavasour with difficulty repressed the shiver of horror which ran through her veins as the landlady of the Raven approached her.

"I will try to drink it," she said.

"To be sure you will, my dear," answered Mrs. Hepwell, "and you won't have to try very hard, neither, I dare say. Why, bless your dear heart, it's the best French brandy, and as mild as mother's milk."

The old woman set down the glass upon the table, and hurried from the room to answer the loud cries of "Mother Bess! Mother Bess!" which resounded from the room upon the other side of the passage.

Let us follow the landlady of the Raven, and enter this room from whence the sound of the voices proceeded.

It was a large apartment, furnished with rough wooden benches and tables, at which several disreputable-looking men, dressed in every variety of costume, were seated, drinking out of different-sized pewter vessels. The ceiling of the room was low, and supported by huge beams, like those in the apartment upon the other side of the passage, for the Raven had not been rebuilt since the reign of Charles the First, and the house was in a fearfully old and tumble-down condition.

The customers of Mrs. Elizabeth Hepwell were by no means an agreeable-looking set of gentlemen. Each member of the little assembly bore that unmistakable stamp which tells of a life at war with society. One of the drinkers was a man whose bloodshot eyes glanced from beneath dark and lowering brows, and seemed to flash defiance at his fellow-men. Another was a short, thick-set fellow, dressed in a shabby Newmarket coat, and disfigured by cuts and bruises, which almost covered his face. Another sported a pair of black eyes and a hideous gash across the mouth. But remarkable as was every creature in that strange assembly, the most peculiar of all was the man whom Philip Howland had addressed as Gambia, and with whom the footman was now closely engaged in conversation.

This man was known among the disreputable customers of Mrs. Hepwell as the Black, or the Nigger; but he was in reality neither black nor a negro. His skin was of that dusky copper hue which distinguishes the natives of the East Indies, and he himself declared that he had been born in that burning clime.

He was a man of about forty years of age, tall and slender, and possessed of that wonderful flexibility of limb which is seldom seen in a European. His hair was raven-black, smooth, silky, and lustrous. His eyes were of that brilliant and piercingly vivid hue which gives to the shining black pupil the appearance of some flashing gem. His features were small, and clearly chiselled as the features of a statue; but, handsome as was the *tout ensemble* of his face, there was a hidden something in his aspect from which those who looked upon him involuntarily recoiled.

None knew the calling of this man.

The reckless wretches who nightly assembled at the Raven scarcely cared to conceal from each other the secrets of their various callings. Burglars, coiners, pick-pockets, sharpers, — all freely conversed about their various adventures and escapes; but not so the Indian, Gambia.

Upon his own affairs this man was as silent as the grave. He appeared every night in the tap-room of the Raven at a certain hour, and at a certain hour left the house, to return none knew whither. He appeared to possess complete authority over the mistress of the house, and her customers soon yielded to him, scarcely knowing why they submitted, but submitting in spite of themselves.

He was one of those beings whom men instinctively obey, and who wear their power with the careless grace of one born in a palace.

He had never confessed to the commission of any crime whatever, yet

there was not one amongst those who knew him who did not secretly believe him to be more deeply dyed in crime than any other member of that guilty assembly.

"I want to say a few words in private, Gambia," whispered Philip Howland, as he and the Indian stood a little way apart from the drunken crew.

The Indian was perfectly sober, though he had been drinking large quantities of raw spirits in the course of the night.

"What do you want to speak about?" he asked, glancing at the servant with a dark scowl, that spread itself like a pall over his copper-colored face.

"About the old business."

The Indian shrugged his shoulders.

"What can you have to say about that?" he exclaimed. "It is done, and it is paid for; that is enough."

"Not quite enough," answered Philip Howland, quietly. "I have a question to ask you."

"Ask it here, then."

"We may be overheard here; come across the passage with me. There is no one in Number Five; we can talk there."

"As you please," answered the Indian, shrugging his shoulders impatiently. "Fortunately I am in a good temper to-night, and do not mind obliging you."

The two men crossed the passage, and entered the room next to that in which the Lady Blanche Vavasour was waiting.

She heard their footsteps, and removed the sliding square of woodwork, according to Philip Howland's direction; then, drawing her chair close to the partition, she seated herself, and placed her ear against the canvas.

She took care to do all this noiselessly.

The Indian was the first to speak.

"Now, what do you want with me?" he asked, flinging himself into a chair.

"The letters which the man who came to this house carried upon his person," answered Philip Howland.

"I tell you again, as I told you before, that the man carried no letters," said the Indian, impatiently.

"But it is known that he never went without the packet of which I speak," replied Philip. "He carried it upon him night and day."

"He did not carry it upon him on the night on which he came here," said Gambia. "He was searched."

"When?"

"After he had been — quieted," answered the Indian, with a dark smile.

"By whom was he searched?"

"By Mother Bess, whose eyes are good at that kind of work; old as she is, nothing escapes her skinny claws."

"And nothing was found?"

"Nothing except a few loose shillings, a pocket-handkerchief, and a couple of pencils. Mother Bess kept the shillings, and sold the handkerchief with the clothes of the — missing man. Those sort of things are her perquisites."

There was a pause: the two men remained silent for some moments.

The Indian was the first to resume the conversation.

"Why have you come here to-night to ask me these questions?" he said.

"Because those who employed me had reason to think that they have been deceived. They were afraid that you had not finished the business. They were afraid that your pity might perhaps have been touched by the prayers of your victim."

"Pity," cried the Indian, with a strange scream of laughter, which rang among the rafters above his head; "pity for the victim whose life is in my hand; whose throat is within my reach. Pity! You do not know whom and what I am."

"I think I know enough of you," answered Philip Howland, recoiling a few paces from the Indian, who stood with his slender form drawn to its fullest height, and his piercing black eyes flashing sparks of angry fire upon the Englishman. "I know that you are unscrupulous and cruel, and that you do not shrink from bloodshed."

"Shrink from bloodshed," repeated Gambia, scornfully; "why should I shrink from that which is my highest glory, — the spilling of blood? Englishman, have you never heard of a race

of men far away in the glorious East, who are the sworn foes of their fellow-creatures; who worship a Divinity who is forever crying to them for the sacrifice of blood at her ensanguined altar? Have you never heard of the Children of Bohwanie?"

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed Philip; "you are a Thug."

"I am," cried the Indian, haughtily, "and my religion is to kill."

Philip Howland was silent.

"Have you heard enough?" asked Gambia.

"I have," replied Philip. "You swear to me that the man whom I introduced to you in this room, and whom I brought to you on the night of the 13th of this month, carried with him no packet of letters whatsoever?"

"I do," answered the Indian, "and what motive could I have for deceiving you? What value should the puling love-letters have for me? Whoever the lady may be who had cause to fear that man, she may henceforth rest in peace. *He will trouble her no more.*"

"Enough, Gambia," said Philip Howland, "and now good-night. I have left my sister in the next room. I will go and fetch her."

He returned to the parlor in which he had left Lady Blanche Vavasour. She was still seated near the partition.

"Have you heard enough, my Lady?" asked Philip.

"Enough to convince me that you have not deceived me," she answered; "but not enough to set my mind at rest. There is some mystery in all this, some treachery. Those letters still exist, and in the existence of those letters there is perpetual danger to me. They must be found, Philip Howland; they must be found. The price which I gave you for that which was done upon the 13th shall be doubled when you place those letters in my hand. Now let us return."

She rose from her seat and followed the servant into the passage.

Between the door of the apartment they had just left and the outer door they met the Indian, who was talking to Mrs. Hepwell.

Lady Blanche looked at this man with a curiosity which was mingled with horror. While Philip stopped to pay his score to the hideous mistress of the house, Blanche Vavasour gazed at the dark but handsome face of the Thug, and in those few moments his features were firmly implanted upon her memory.

"I shall never forget that man," she murmured, as she retired with Philip Howland to the street in which they had left the cab.

"It is to be hoped that you will never see him again, my lady," answered Philip. "He has been useful, he has served us, and we may dismiss him from our memory. He was well enough as a tool."

"That man's face is not the face of one who would be content to be the tool of others," said Lady Blanche, thoughtfully. "You have done the best you could to serve me, Philip Howland, and you have been well paid for your services; but you have not served me wisely. That Indian should never have been trusted."

CHAPTER IX.

AURORA.

Upon the morning of the 17th of October, there was an unusual stir and bustle in a small town called Clampington, in the county of Kent, and about fifty miles from London.

Merry groups were collected in the narrow high street, young and old alike wearing their holiday clothes and holiday smiles. Even the shop windows looked smarter than usual. The brass plates upon the doors of the lawyer's and the doctor's houses were burnished to their highest polish; the stone steps were whitened to their snowiest tint; every object in Clampington, animate and inanimate, seemed to wear its brightest looks upon this sunny autumn morning.

The reason of this was, that on the 17th of October was held Clampington Cattle Fair,—a festivity which was dear to every honest and true-hearted inhabitant of the little town.

Who could object to that joyous and innocent merry-making, in which young and old, rich and poor, forgot all differences of age and rank, and freely intermingled in the general enjoyment?

A busy scene was going forward in the meadows behind Clampington, where the gipsies and Cheap Johns, the showmen and prize fighters, the jugglers and giants, and dwarfs and fat ladies, were all alike employed in preparing for the day's business, which was no idle sport to them.

In one group an old woman was superintending the last touches which a dancing girl was putting to the toilets of her companions.

There was nothing remarkable in the appearance of these two dancing girls. They were sufficiently good-looking, but they had that air of vulgarity and brazen assurance which was natural to the strolling life they led; but the face of the old woman was one which was calculated to make a considerable impression upon those who beheld her. And yet we have no occasion to describe her appearance, for she was the living counterpart of Mrs. Elizabeth Hepwell, the landlady of the Raven. She had the same hooked nose and wrinkled skin, the same catlike eyes, the same white hair. The only difference between the two women was in the tint of their complexions. The landlady of the Raven had that white and sickly-looking skin which bespeaks a life of confinement in foul air; the show-woman's face was bronzed by exposure to every kind of atmosphere. She was talking to the two girls, who listened to her with every appearance of respect.

"Now, you listen to me, Bella," she said. "You and Liz are to dance on the platform with Charley Stephens, Sarah Smithers, and the clown; but remember, whatever you do, Aurora is not to come outside. She is to act the Princess in the Spectre of the Mountain, and to sing between the pieces."

"All right, mother," answered the girl whom the old woman had addressed as Bella; "we'll take care of Aurora. Poor little thing, she's always ready to cry if she has to dance outside before the crowd. The noise and the riot upsets her just as if she was some delicate young lady."

"Where is she?" asked the woman. "Hiding away somewhere, I suppose. I can't think what is the matter with the girl. Instead of enjoying her life along of us, she's always creeping into corners, or wandering about with John Primmins, her father, as she calls him, though he's about as much her father as I am her mother, bless her silly heart!"

"Hush, Mother Flipson!" said the girl; "here she comes, and Mr. Primmins with her, I declare. The stupid old chap never seems so happy as when he's running after Aurora."

"Yes!" cried a stentorian voice, "here she is, ladies and gents! here's the little beauty! The right down real original, warranted to wear forever, and wash afterwards, and dye another color arter that, and then wash white again, and cut up to make frocks for the little uns: that's the sort of stuff she is, ladies and gents! and what shall I say for the little beauty, ladies and gents? Shall I say three and six? Well, then, I tell you what, — I won't say three and six, — I'll say three shillings; Come, I'll say half a crown. Come, then, I'm in such a generous humor today, I'll say next to nothing; I'll say two shillings; I'll say eighteen pence; I'll say one shilling. I'll say ninepence, and there she goes, knocked down to the first gent who has the courage to pull out the browns, and secure a bargain what the Hemperor of Roosia might envy."

The man who uttered this extraordinary speech was a stalwart fellow of some forty years of age, with a good-humored, rosy face, bright blue eyes, a pair of broad shoulders, and legs which an alderman might have envied. He wore a corduroy jacket and knee-breeches, tight blue worsted stockings, Blucher boots, and a very glossy seal-skin cap, stuck very much on one side, upon his flaxen hair.

He led by the hand a girl whose beauty was of that radiant order which even the tongue of envy can scarce gainsay.

She was of the middle height, slight

and graceful in figure. Her features were small and delicate; her eyes of that brilliant and luminous hazel which is so rarely seen; and her hair a rich brown, tinged with a golden shade, which gave it a wondrous beauty. This dark yet glittering hair hung upon her shoulders in long, rippling curls, which clustered in slender rings, natural as the tendrils of a vine. Her hazel eyes were fringed with long lashes of golden hue. The eyes, therefore, were darker than the lashes, and this reversal of the usual order of things gave a certain degree of peculiarity to her face. There was that in her beauty which reminded the beholder of no other beauty. She stood alone, and her image remained forever imprinted upon the memories of those who beheld her.

She laughed a clear, gushing laugh, musical as the carol of a bird, at the nonsensical speech of Mr. John Primmins, who was one of the most distinguished Cheap Jacks that ever entered the county of Kent.

"Dear father," she said, "if you waste all your eloquence upon me, you will have no breath to spare for the fair to-day."

"No breath, my little lass," cried Mr. John Primmins, echoing his favorite's merry laugh with a stentorian guffaw of his own, — "no breath, did you say, my little beauty? Why, if I was to talk from now to the end of the world, I should have more breath when I left off than when I began. For why, ladies and gents," added Mr. Primmins, appealing to his companions, who listened laughingly to his professional chatter, — "for why, ladies and gents? Why, because I take one of Professor Hookham Snivey's Universal Regenerator of Mankind Pills every three hours; and that's why I've got a fine voice, and handsome calves to my legs. The Universal Regenerator Pill, only thirteen pence halfpenny a box, including the government stamp, which is inflicted upon the nation by a bigoted ministry, what's afraid that if the Regenerator Pill was cheap, everybody would live forever, and there'd be no corn for the bloated aristocrats."

Another peal of laughter greeted this speech, in which merry music Aurora joined as gayly as any of her companions.

"My dearest father," she said, "when will you be sensible?"

"Not till folly goes out of fashion, my love," replied Mr. John Primmins; "and, as that will apparently be a precious long time first, I shall take the liberty to bide my time and be comfortable."

The noisy group dispersed to prepare for the grand business of the day. The clown crept into a corner of the travelling van, and completed his toilet, which had been only half made. The two girls, Bella and Lizzy, practised a dance, with which they were to enchant the inhabitants of Clampington. The members of the orchestra, which consisted of a drum, a set of Pandean pipes, a cracked flute, and a wheezy old violin, examined their respective instruments, and got themselves in order for the day's work; while Mother Flipson, the proprietress of the caravan, kept a sharp eye upon everything that was going forward, to see that no time was wasted, and that every member of the little company put his or her shoulder to the wheel.

"Look alive, boys and girls!" cried the old woman; "there's no call to go to sleep over your work, or to let the grass grow under your feet, while the rival carawans is making hay. Look sharp and cut about, every one of you, and them as works hardest shall have the best breakfast, to make 'em equal to the day's exertion."

"You've got nothing to do, Aurora, except look pretty, till the fair begins," said Mr. Primmins to the fair young girl, who clung lovingly to his stalwart arm; "so you come along of me, my lass, and we'll have a bit of breakfast together, you and me and Mossoo."

"Mossoo," as Mr. Primmins called him, was an immense white French poodle, which was Aurora's constant companion. The dog adored his young mistress, who had taught him to go through a series of performances, which made him very attractive at the numerous fairs which Mother Flipson's company attended.

Mr. John Primmins was the indepen-

dent proprietor of a smart little van, filled with every kind of useful and ornamental article calculated to charm the rustic taste of the merry country lads and lassies.

There were some malicious people who said that the blades of Mr. John Pimmins' best Sheffield knives bent double, and curled up like pieces of stiff paper, when the confiding purchaser attempted to use them; that his cut-glass tumblers flew into a dozen pieces with the first drop of warm water that was poured into them; that his Regenerator of Mankind Pills were made of bread and gamboge; and that the celebrated medical professor, Dr. Hookham Snivey, was a gentleman who had no existence except in the vivid imagination of John Primmins. But these scandalous reports came, of course, from the envenomed lips of that envy with which all great men have had to contend.

The young girl, Aurora, was the adopted daughter of Mr. John Primmins.

Twenty years before the opening of this story, the good-natured itinerant auctioneer had been aroused one morning by the feeble wail of an infant voice, crying on the little flight of steps outside the caravan in which the Cheap Jack slept when stationary, and in which he also travelled into almost every corner of pleasant England. Mr. Primmins rose hastily at the sound of this feeble little voice, and opening the smart door of his caravan, which was adorned with a brass plate and knocker, he looked out into the dim gray morning.

At the foot of the little flight of steps lay a child about six months old, huddled up in a ragged cloak, which looked like the cast-off garment of some tramper gipsy.

Mr. Primmins took the wailing child in his arms. He was fond of children, and, bachelor though he was, knew how to handle an infant with wonderful dexterity; he was in the habit of playing with the little ones of the comrades he met in his daily rambles. The infant opened its large hazel eyes to their fullest extent, and stared wonderingly at the tender-hearted Cheap Jack. Then, as if its baby instinct recognized a friend and protector in the young man, it suddenly ceased crying, and crowed and smiled in Mr. Primmins' face.

"By all that's lucky," exclaimed John Primmins, "if this here is a little strayed lamb nobody owns, I'll keep it and bring it up to be a comfort to me in my old age, when I retires from business, and never takes in nobody no more, but comes and digs my taters out of the ocean, as the gentlefolks say."

The child was never claimed, though Mr. Primmins made inquiries amongst the booths and stalls throughout the fair. Nobody had lost an infant, and indeed it was quite clear to the Cheap Jack that, as the child was not able to walk, it must have been deliberately placed there by some heartless and unnatural mother who wished to rid herself of her tender burden, and who, no doubt, had left the neighborhood immediately after deserting her helpless offspring.

It was the old, old story. Providence, which is never deaf to the cries of the innocent and unhappy, had raised up a friend for this deserted child, in the person of the good-natured young auctioneer.

Mr. John Primmins called his little protege, Aurora, because, as he said, he found her in the dawn, and she came to him with the morning light. He gave her into the charge of Mother Flipson, who, grim and ugly as she was to look at, was a gentle nurse to the little stranger, and brought her up as tenderly as if she had been a princess. The child's youth was therefore spent between the two caravans. Sometimes she sat beside Jack Primmins, in his gayly decorated cart, and took the money from his rustic customers. On these occasions her pretty face always attracted great notice, and it seemed a pleasure to the rough country folks to pay their money to the lovely child. At other times, Aurora danced before the crowded admirers in Mrs. Flipson's dramatic booth, or sang her ballads between the grand melodrama, which was performed by the old woman's company, and the pantomime, which concluded the entertainment. Sometimes she exhibited the wonderful feats of her pet-

forming dog, Mossoo, at country races; but, wherever she went, honest John Primmins was always at hand to watch over and protect her, and he would have been a bold man who would have offered the shadow of an insult to Cheap Jack's adopted daughter.

Among these rustic wanderers she grew to girlhood, every day becoming more lovely and more bewitching. Mr. Primmins carried about with him a little stock of books, and from these books she had contrived to educate herself, with the help of her adopted father, who, during her childhood, had employed his evenings in teaching her to read and write.

From an old French juggler, who travelled often with Mother Flipson's company, the young girl had learned a great deal of the French language, displaying a rare facility in acquiring proficiency both in that and in music, which seemed as natural to her as to the nightingale. Her melodious and plaintive voice was the delight of her companions, and many an evening, during the country rambles of the show-folks, she would sit beneath the starlit sky, warbling some tender ballad to a quiet circle of listeners.

In this rough rustic life she was perfectly happy. She had that innocent and joyous mind to which Nature is always delightful. She sighed for no splendid home; to her the purple vault of heaven was more beautiful than the painted roof of a palace. She did not pine for costly dresses or glittering jewels; for to her the simple field flowers, decked with glistening dew-drops, were more lovely than gems and gold.

There was but one thought that ever caused a cloud upon her snowy brow, and that thought was of the mother whom she had never known, — the mother who had perhaps deserted her.

Sometimes she would steal away from her noisy companions, and wander out into the still, starlit meadows, pondering upon this unknown mother.

"She must have been very unhappy when she deserted me," thought the young girl, "very wretched and very lonely! Dear mother, if you still live, how gladly would I clasp you to my heart! I would not reproach you for your desertion; I would only pity you for your sorrows."

She had sometimes talked to John Primmins about this subject; but it always seemed to make her adopted father unhappy.

"Never you mind about *her*, little beauty," he would say; "she was a wicked woman, whoever she was, to desert such a lovely lass as you, and I've no common patience with her. So never you worry your precious head about her, my pet; for she aint worth it. I'll be father and mother and all to you, dear, and you shall marry a *dook*, if you like, and I'll set his Grace up in Sheffield knives, which looks very pretty if they don't cut over-sharp, and japanned tea-trays with peacocks and roses and geraniums and Chinese pagodas painted all over 'em; to say nothing of the money as I've got in the savings-bank, which shall every penny of it be yours, my lass. There's many a poor markis, I dare say, as would be jolly glad of Jack Primmins' savings," added the auctioneer, with considerable pride.

There was one secret, and one only, which John Primmins kept from his adopted child, and that secret was the existence of a scrap of paper which he had found pinned upon the ragged frock of the deserted infant.

Upon that paper was written only these two words: —

"ESTELLA'S REVENGE."

CHAPTER X.

THE TEST OF TRUTH.

UPON the same day as that on which Mrs. Flipson's little band of strolling players prepared for the fair at Clampington, the Duke of Arlington called at Lord Templeton's house in Piccadilly. Gerald Mortimer had suffered the long and silent agony of a sleepless night, passed in alternate paroxysms of doubt and fear, faith and terror. He had not attempted to retire to rest, but had passed the night in pacing up and down his luxurious bed-chamber, or seated, brooding darkly over the low fire in the glittering steel stove.

The shadowy form of the White Phantom haunted him in the still silence. In vain he sought to reason upon this mystery which had neither beginning nor end.

Who, or what, was this shadow which he had seen in the untenanted house?

"It is a vile conspiracy!" he exclaimed. "It is a hideous plot designed by some hidden enemy of the loveliest and purest of women. Yet who could be so base as to seek to injure Blanche Vavasour? Surely none but a maniac, possessed of some horrible and demoniac hallucination."

It was thus that the duke argued upon a mystery which was utterly impenetrable to him.

The long hours of the silent night passed slowly in that magnificent mansion, and the solitary and wretched wanderers who passed through Cavendish Square, in which the duke's house was situated, little dreamed of the anguish which was racking the breast of the owner of that princely habitation.

Early upon the morning of the 17th, Gerald Mortimer walked from Cavendish Square to Piccadilly, and presented himself at the house of the Earl of Templeton.

This time he was admitted. The servant who ushered him into the drawing-room was Philip Howland.

This man looked furtively at the pale face of the duke. The noble countenance of Gerald Mortimer was like some open book whose truthful pages reveal only that which is great and generous. Every emotion was plainly written upon that brave and candid face, and Philip Howland clearly saw that some secret trouble was preying upon the mind of Lady Blanche Vavasour's affianced husband.

"If he knew," muttered the footman, as he walked with a soft step through the long corridors between the outer hall and the elegant morning room into which he ushered his Grace, —"if he knew as much as I do, I wonder how he'd act."

"Lady Blanche Vavasour has recovered from the headache from which she suffered last night?" asked Gerald Mortimer.

"I believe that her Ladyship's health is considerably improved this morning," answered the servant.

"She had a good night, then."

"An excellent night, your Grace. Her Ladyship is now with my Lord, who is suffering from his old attack of gout. I will go and inform her of your Grace's visit."

"Stop," exclaimed the duke, as Philip Howland was about to leave the room. "I think you said that Lady Blanche was in Lord Templeton's room. I will go there at once."

Philip Howland bowed.

"Suffer me to go and announce your Grace's visit," he said, walking towards the door, which opened upon the corridor and private staircase leading to the rooms tenanted by the earl.

Gerald Mortimer placed his strong hand upon the footman's shoulder and put him aside.

"I will go unannounced," he said, passing the servant and walking towards the private staircase.

Philip Howland watched the nobleman's receding form as he ascended the stairs.

"Hum!" he muttered; "she's a bold one; but I wonder for all that how she'll face her husband that is to be this morning."

The Earl of Templeton had begun life as a younger son. He had entered the army, never expecting to succeed to his father's title, and had fought nobly for his king and his country. He was the youngest of three brothers, and had little beyond his pay in a cavalry regiment. He had therefore to endure all the agonies of a poor aristocrat, and to behold himself in position the inferior of men whose fathers had scraped together princely fortunes from the counting-house and the shop. He endured all this silently, courageously,—as a proud man will ever endure humiliation,— and he ultimately won for himself the respect of every member of his corps; but he suffered intensely, and his sufferings embittered a disposition which had been originally noble.

He was forty years of age when he succeeded to the earldom, both his elder brothers having died childless, but the estates attached to the title

were wasted by the extravagance of the two last earls, and Frederick Vavasour found himself still a poor man.

A year after he became Lord Templeton he married a young girl, of whose history the world knew nothing, but whose beauty won for her the admiration of the capricious and heartless votaries of fashion. Lady Templeton was accepted as the reigning beauty of a brief London season. She was flattered, caressed, courted, and her girlish nature was almost intoxicated by the homage of a crowd of fops and the admiration of aristocratic assemblies. Two years after her marriage she died, leaving behind her an infant of three months old; and, in less than a week, the lovely Lady Templeton was as completely forgotten as if she had never existed.

She had disappeared from the glittering horizon of fashionable life into the dark ocean of the past, — that sad and reproachful past to which the votaries of the gay world never look back.

Lord Templeton had but one passion, one thought, one ambition, after the death of his young wife, and that all-absorbing passion was his love for his infant daughter, Lady Blanche Vavasour.

Every emotion of the strong man's heart was concentred in this helpless babe, and as, year after year, the child grew more beautiful, the man's love increased until it reached that wondrous infinite which knows not expansion or limitation.

It was natural, then, that he should rejoice in the prospect of his daughter's marriage with one of the richest and proudest nobles of England. It was natural, too, that he should shrink with horror from the thought that his beloved Blanche could by any possibility form a mesalliance.

"It is not only the wealth and grandeur which will be yours, Blanche," murmured the fond father, — "I am not so base as to value these alone, or there are many from whom I might have chosen your husband, — it is the recollection of Gerald Mortimer's noble nature, his brave spirit, his generous devotion, his fearless and chivalrous *disposition,* — these are the thoughts which make me happy when I ponder upon this superb alliance."

The earl knew not, dreamed not, of the attachment between Lady Blanche Vavasour and Hubert Monkton.

Lord Templeton had often met the artist in the corridors and anterooms of his mansion. He had seen him seated by Lady Blanche in the young girl's boudoir; but in the eyes of the aristocrat the creature of painting was some creature of inferior clay, upon whom it would have been idle to cast a thought.

Had any one hinted to the haughty nobleman that his daughter could possibly *love* this penniless artist, he would have laughed the thought to scorn. The idea would have been an insult, not only to his pride, but to his common sense. It would have been beneath him even to resent the utterance of such preposterous folly.

Blinded, therefore, by this unassailable hauteur, the earl had observed nothing. He had left Lady Blanche free to follow her own course, confident in the honor of his beloved child.

Blanche Vavasour was seated by the side of this devoted father when the Duke of Arlington entered the room.

Never had she looked more beautiful or more innocent. The clear blue eyes were undimmed by a shadow; the pearly freshness of the delicate complexion was even more exquisite than usual; the massive rippling golden hair was pushed carelessly from the alabaster brow, and gathered into a knot at the back of the head.

Lady Blanche had emerged from her dressing-room three hours before, radiant and smiling; simply dressed in a loose morning-gown of white muslin.

At eight o'clock she had taken her place at a little breakfast-table in the earl's bed-chamber, and had with her own hands prepared the invalid's chocolate.

Six hours before, she had been listening to Gambia, the Thug, in the dingy panelled chamber of the Raven.

The duke felt a thrill of relief, as he gazed at the lovely face of his betrothed. What could be more delightful to the feelings of the adoring lover than the picture which he beheld in the invalid's chamber?

A devoted daughter seated at her father's side, watchful of his every glance, eager to administer to his slightest want, ready to anticipate his most idle wish.

"To doubt her would be to doubt Heaven itself," thought Gerald Mortimer, as he exchanged the commonplace greetings of ceremonious life.

Then, with a graver manner, Gerald Mortimer suddenly addressed himself to his future father-in-law.

"My dear Templeton," he said, "having ascertained the state of your health, perhaps you will permit me to have a few moments' conversation with Blanche?"

"Certainly," replied the earl, laughing; "a few hours if you like. Pray chatter away to your heart's content, young people, while I amuse myself with my newspaper."

"Pardon me, my Lord, but I mean private conversation."

"Private conversation!" exclaimed the impetuous old soldier, looking rather fiercely at his intended son-in-law. "Pray what can you have to say to Blanche that her father cannot hear, — eh, Gerald?"

Lady Blanche Vavasour neither started nor changed color, but her breath went and came rather more rapidly than before.

She rose from her seat and spoke before the duke had time to reply to Lord Templeton's question.

"Whatever Gerald may have to say to me, dearest father," she said, "you will not, I am sure, deny me the privilege to hear it."

Again the duke felt relieved by her innocent candor.

"Were she other than she appears," he thought, "would she thus seek an interview in which I might attempt to unmask her?"

"You will not refuse to let me hear what Gerald has to say, dearest father?" repeated Lady Blanche.

"No, I will not, my dear," exclaimed the earl. "Take him into my morning-room and hear this tremendous secret, whatever it may be. But pray come back to your lonely old father as soon as you can, and bring Gerald with you. I want to ask his opinion of a leader in this morning's 'Times.' The thunderer has uttered one of his terrific growls. There, go along, my darling, but don't forget the gouty old man to whom your presence is sunshine."

If Lord Templeton had been the most determined match-maker, he could not have said anything more calculated to charm the affianced of his daughter.

Lady Blanche led the way into the earl's morning-room, which was separated from the bed-chamber by the dressing and bath rooms.

"Now, Gerald," she said, as she closed the door of his apartment behind her, "tell me, dearest, bravest, and best, what is it that troubles you; for I can see the shadows of trouble in those truthful brown eyes, and the darkness of sorrow upon that open brow. Tell me, my beloved, what has happened."

The duke clasped the rounded arm of his betrothed within his strong hand, and drew her into the deep embrasure of the large French window. Then, with his disengaged hand, he drew aside the voluminous lace curtains which shaded this window, and admitted the full glory of the autumn sunshine.

The broad stream of light fell upon the face of Lady Blanche Vavasour.

"I want to see your eyes, Blanche," said the duke, gravely. "I want to look into your eyes while I speak to you, and see whether truth or falsehood lurks in their azure depths."

The glance which met his own seemed truthful as the gaze of an angel, as Lady Blanche replied to these strange words.

"You, surely, cannot fear the result of such a test, my Gerald," she murmured. "Whatever foolish fancy may possess you, you can have no thought so foolish as a doubt of me."

"You speak fearlessly, Blanche."

"Why should I speak otherwise? You see I am not afraid of the broad sunlight; and I look you boldly in the face. What have you to say to me, dearest?"

"Blanche Vavasour, there is a conspiracy against your honor!" Gerald Mortimer uttered these words with a

terrible solemnity; but there was no shadow of change in the fair face into which he looked.

"There are those in this city vile enough to accuse you of infamy, — nay, more, of crime!"

She started, and her bright eyes flashed indignantly, but it was with the indignation of innocence. No change of color betrayed either terror or dismay. The blush roses on her cheeks never faded from their delicate hue.

"Of crime, Blanche Vavasour. Of that deadly and unatonable wickedness which is the worst and blackest in the hideous catalogue of crime."

"What crime?" she exclaimed.

"They accuse you of — murder."

The duke paused before uttering the ghastly word. It seemed to jar with the bright sunshine and the fair face looking into his own.

"There are madmen enough in this city," said Lady Blanche, with a hauteur which was strange to her; "but I did not think your Grace would be so foolish as to listen to them."

The duke released the arm which he had retained in his powerful grasp throughout this brief dialogue, and walked towards the door.

"Enough, Blanche," he exclaimed. "I never was base enough to doubt you; but I wished from your own lips to hear how mad I had been in being disquieted by this vile plot. I go from this house to that of my lawyer."

"For what purpose?" asked Lady Blanche.

"To set him upon the track of the wretches who have concocted this conspiracy. *Au revoir*, dearest! I will return in a few hours and tell you the result of my morning's work."

As the door closed upon the Duke of Arlington, Blanche Vavasour drew a cambric handkerchief from her pocket, and pressed it to her mouth.

When she removed this snowy handkerchief it was stained with a slender stream of blood which trickled from her lower lip upon the cambric.

During her interview with the duke her teeth had closed convulsively upon this rosy lip until the edges of those sharp, white teeth had met in the pulpy flesh.

"The missing letters!" she claimed, as she flung the blood-stai handkerchief aside. "At any cos any peril, I must discover those n ing letters."

CHAPTER XI.

THE ADVERTISEMENT IN THE "TIME

Amongst the many admirers of I Blanche Vavasour, who had flutt around the fair queen of beauty du the London season, there was whom report declared to be more perately smitten than any of his ri This gentleman was a certain Mr. cival Holmwood, who was some distinguished for his eccentricitie the fashionable circle in which moved.

He was rich, handsome, clever, accomplished. Although barely and twenty years of age, he had t elled through the whole of Eur part of Africa and Asia, and a siderable portion of America. order to accomplish so much in so l a period as the interval between eighteenth and twenty-fifth year, P val Holmwood had scattered his t sands to the right and left with recklessness of a man who knows his fortune is comparatively inexha ible.

Possessed of this almost bound wealth, with cultivated manner handsome face, and an elegant fig it is scarcely to be wondered at Mr. Holmwood easily found an entr into the sacred circle of the fashion world.

He was *admitted*, but he did *belong* to that bright hemisphere; Percival Holmwood's antecedents known to none of those with whor associated. Many rumors were a upon the subject. Some said that young millionnaire was the illegitir son of a royal duke; others tha was the heir of an Albanian Jew. further the speakers were from knowledge of the actual truth, the r

exaggerated were the reports which they circulated.

Percival Holmwood laughed openly at the idle scandals. "My friends know so much more than I know myself," he would say, laughingly, amid some crowded assembly, "that I leave it to them to tell my story; and, as they contrive to invent a fresh history about once in three weeks, it must be a great deal more interesting to the public."

Much as Mr. Holmwood's affairs were talked of behind his back, nobody ever ventured to ask the young man any questions upon the mystery of his parentage. The brilliant and sarcastic traveller was by no means a person to be trifled with.

When Lady Blanche Vavasour appeared in society, and at once took her place as the reigning beauty of the season, Percival Holmwood had just returned from the East. He saw, and was immediately struck with, the young belle, and, as he had that confidence in himself which wealth and talent are alike calculated to bestow, he had little doubt of being able to obtain the hand of the poor nobleman's daughter.

The engagement between the Duke of Arlington and Lady Blanche was of very brief duration, as the lovers had only lately met at Baden, whither the earl had taken his daughter at the close of the London season. They had hurried back to England in order to superintend the necessary arrangements for the marriage, which was to take place in the early spring of the ensuing year.

The engagement of the duke and Lady Blanche was, therefore, first announced in the fashionable journal, from which Isadora Monkton read the announcement to her Cousin Hubert.

This journal did not happen to fall into the hands of Percival Holmwood until the morning of the 17th of October.

The young man was seated at breakfast in his chambers in the Albany, attended by his confidential servant, a Frenchman, who had travelled with him in all his wanderings, and with whom the eccentric young millionnaire was on very familiar terms.

Percival Holmwood was tall and slender. His complexion was fair; his hair and mustache auburn, and worn very much in the fashion of the students at Heidelburg, at which university he had passed his early youth. His rich dressing-gown of dark green Genoa velvet set off his delicately handsome face and small white hands, and his slender and womanish feet were adorned with exquisitely embroidered slippers.

He had a singularly effeminate manner, and the small china-covered cup of chocolate and tiny French roll, which stood near him, resembled the delicate breakfast of a romantic young lady, rather than the substantial repast of a gentleman.

A small crystal jug, half filled with claret, and a glass of the thinnest and most fragile form, stood near the chocolate. A silver basket lined with vine-leaves and filled with large, purple hot-house grapes, completed the breakfast equipage.

"Any news, Louis?" asked the young millionnaire, languidly, scarcely lifting his drooping eyelids as he addressed the valet. "You know I make a point of never looking at the papers myself, they are so abominably tiresome; but I expect you to keep me acquainted with all that's going on. Any news?"

"That depends upon what kind of news monsieur requires," replied the Frenchman, who spoke English very fluently, but with a slight accent; "political or social, or domestic; the affairs of the nation, the reports of the police offices, or births, deaths, and marriages."

"Suppose we try births, deaths, and marriages," said Percival Holmwood, sipping his chocolate, "they're sure to be interesting, — especially the marriages."

"Perhaps peculiarly so on this occasion, monsieur," answered Louis, with some significance; "for, among the gossiping reports in the columns of the 'Morning Post,' I see the announcement of the intended marriage of a lady whom, as some people thought, monsieur rather admired."

"What lady?" asked Percival, with redoubled languor. "I know a great many ladies, my dear Louis, and I

have admired a great many ladies; may I ask which lady this is?"

"Lady Blanche Vavasour. Monsieur has not forgotten the lovely Lady Blanche?"

"Forgotten her!" exclaimed Percival Holmwood, springing suddenly from his reclining position, and standing on the tiger-skin rug before the blazing fire. "Forgotten her! No, by Heaven! What have you to tell me about Blanche Vavasour?"

The change which came over Percival Holmwood as he said this was so startling that any one who had looked at his listless face before, would scarcely have recognized it now. His eyes were the most peculiar feature in his face. They were of a pale greenish-blue, large and limpid, and capable of expressing every emotion. They were not beautiful eyes, but they were eyes which, once seen, were not easy to be forgotten. As he rose from his chair his delicate face flushed to a vivid crimson, and these large, pale-hued eyes seemed to flash fire, as he turned fiercely upon the astonished servant.

"What have you to tell me of Lady Blanche Vavasour?" he repeated.

"Simply this, monsieur: If the report in the 'Morning Post' is correct, the lady is to be married early next year to the Duke of Arlington. I trust this intelligence is not disagreeable to monsieur?"

The crimson flush had faded from Percival Holmwood's face, and the angry fire had died out in his eyes as he answered his valet.

"Not more disagreeable than the news of a pretty woman's marriage must always be to her bachelor acquaintance," he said, with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "Perhaps I imagined myself the favored individual, and perhaps I am jealous of the Duke of Arlington."

The valet looked searchingly at his master's face.

"But monsieur is not seriously annoyed?" he said, anxiously.

"Seriously annoyed, my dear Louis? What an absurd question!"

The young man poured out a glass of claret. The watchful valet saw that his master's hands trembled violently, in spite of his affected carelessness,— so violently that the lip of the crystal claret jug rattled against the rim of the glass.

The discreet domestic did not appear to notice Mr. Holmwood's agitation.

Percival Holmwood was silent for some minutes; then, suddenly rousing himself from his reverie, he consulted his watch.

"Half-past twelve," he muttered. "I have breakfasted late. Bring me my coat and boots, Louis; I am going out."

The valet brought a fashionable morning-coat and a pair of small varnished boots from the adjoining room, and assisted his master to complete his toilet.

Then, while the young fop arranged his simple black silk cravat by the aid of the looking-glass over the broad malachite chimney-piece, Louis Clemence poured a quantity of exquisite perfume upon the cambric handkerchief, which he handed to his master. He next took a miniature bouquet from a china vase which stood on a marble slab, and placed the fragile blossoms in the button-hole of Mr. Holmwood's coat.

This bouquet consisted of a few buds of orange blossom, a tiny cluster of violets, and a sprig of jessamine.

These particular flowers were supplied to Mr. Holmwood every day in the year, whatever the inclemency of the season; and the annual sum which he paid to the florist who supplied them would have kept a small family in comfort.

But individual extravagance of this kind is in a manner necessary to the well-being of society. The poor are fed and clothed, housed and sheltered, by the caprices of the rich.

"Will monsieur require his horse or his cab?" asked the valet.

"Neither," replied Percival, absently, as he took his hat from the servant's hand, and passed out of the elegant apartment.

He walked at a sharp pace, which was quite unusual to him, and did not once slacken his step until he arrived before the doorway of Lord Templeton's mansion.

He stopped suddenly as he was

about to raise his hand to the knocker, and looked up at the front of the house.

"I must surely be mistaken," he muttered, "and yet—"

He apparently abandoned his intention of knocking at the door, and walked rapidly across the road to the opposite pavement. He stopped before the railings of the Park and looked once more at the frontage of Lord Templeton's mansion.

"Strange!" he exclaimed. "Very, very strange!"

He recrossed the road and knocked at the door of the earl's house. He was admitted by Philip Howland.

The footman was out of breath. He had only just descended the staircase as the knock resounded on the panel of the door, and he had pushed aside his fellow-servant in order to answer Mr. Holmwood's summons.

"Keep out of the way, James," he whispered, as he passed the other footman; "I want to see everybody who comes to this house to-day."

Percival asked to see the earl's daughter.

"Lady Blanche Vavasour is in my Lord's morning-room," Philip Howland said in answer to the young man's inquiry. "I will conduct you to her, sir."

He led the way to the apartment in which the duke and his betrothed had met only half an hour before, and, opening the door softly, announced "Mr. Percival Holmwood."

Blanche Vavasour was seated near the low fireplace, half-buried in the luxurious cushions of her easy-chair. Her eyes were fixed with a steadfast, yet absent, gaze upon the burning coals in the steel stove, and her hands lay listlessly in her lap.

She started at the sound of the opening of the door, and she started still more violently at the announcement of Percival Holmwood's name.

She half rose from her chair, and glanced rapidly round the room, with something of the expression of a hunted animal, which finds itself at bay and looks hopelessly for some means of escape.

"Pray do not disturb yourself, Lady Blanche," said the young man, quietly, as he closed the ponderous door behind him. "I have a good deal to say to you, and I must beg that you do not allow my presence to discompose you, as I rely upon your listening very calmly and dispassionately to what I have to say."

The face of the millionnaire was very pale, and there was a look of determination in his eyes, and rigid lines about his small, girlish mouth, which threatened danger to any one who might have provoked his enmity.

"Percival Holmwood!" exclaimed Lady Blanche, looking at the young man with a countenance expressive of far more terror than she had shown beneath the scrutinizing glance of the Duke of Arlington.

"Percival Holmwood, your ladyship's very obedient servant," answered her visitor. "I am surprised that you did me so great an honor as to remember my name."

Lady Blanche rose again from her chair, and this time advanced a step towards a small door leading to the earl's bed-chamber.

"My father is very ill, Mr. Holmwood," she said; "pardon me if I bring this interview to an abrupt close."

The young man arrested her by an imperative gesture, and pointed to the low chair from which she had risen.

"You must and shall hear me, Lady Blanche Vavasour," he said, in a cold and stern voice. "You might dismiss a begging letter-writer, or an importunate tradesman, but you shall not dismiss me. You were not hurrying to your invalid father when I entered this room. You have invented that pitiful excuse in order to avoid me, and you have done so because you fear me."

"Fear you!" repeated Lady Blanche, sinking into her chair, with her eyes fixed upon the face of Percival Holmwood with something of the gaze with which some wretched bird yields to the fascination of the snake.

"Yes, you fear me, and shall I tell you why you fear me?"

"Yes."

"You fear me because you have wronged me,—deeply wronged me,—and because you know that I am not

the man to submit tamely to a wrong, or to be very scrupulous in my manner of avenging myself. The wounded tiger is not very pitiful of the unlucky huntsman who misses his aim and falls into the power of the infuriated beast; and I fear there is something tigerish in my disposition."

Lady Blanche shrugged her shoulders with an evident effort to appear at her ease.

"You are talking riddles, my dear Mr. Holmwood," she said, with affected carelessness.

"Am I, Lady Blanche Vavasour? I will endeavor, then, to speak more plainly."

"In the spring of last year I had the pleasure of meeting you very often in the brilliant assemblies of which you were the greatest ornament. Need I say that to see you was to admire you; that admiration very speedily yielded to love; and that love, in a being of my ardent and impetuous nature, became an all-absorbing passion. I knew you to be ambitious, ay, in spite of that innocent face, which, in its almost celestial beauty, resembled the face of an angel, and I knew that a wealthy alliance was that which you sought; but I knew that you did not love me, —nay, more, I had discovered that you loved another."

"It is false!" exclaimed Lady Blanche, suddenly.

"Is it false? Is it false, that a certain Hubert Monkton, a poor but clever artist, was the constant visitor in your boudoir, the constant companion of your lonely hours? I only saw you and this Hubert Monkton together twice in the whole course of last season, but on those two occasions I saw—"

"What?"

"Enough to convince me that you loved him,—as much as you were capable of loving,—and that he knew of your love. He thought, perhaps, poor fool! that you meant to stoop from your high estate to marry the man whose genius was his only fortune. I knew better, for I knew that you would wed none who could not give you wealth and splendor. was able to give you these things, and I determined that you should become my wife."

"You are mad, Mr. Holmwood."

"To that end I sought your society. You encouraged my attentions, you courted my smiles. I saw that you caught at the golden bait, and I felt so secure of my lovely prize that I did not attempt to hasten matters. When you left London for Baden our parting was like the parting of betrothed lovers. I still have the hot-house flower you gave me. I still remember the tones of your farewell. I returned from a yachting expedition on the coast of Spain a few days ago, and this morning I heard for the first time that you, too, were in England, and that you were about to be married. I come to you, Lady Blanche Vavasour, to ask if this is true."

She looked at him for a few moments, as if considering whether she could avoid answering this question, then, with a visible effort, she said, "It is perfectly true."

"And you considered yourself under no implied pledge to me?"

"None whatever. If my manner of receiving your attentions has unhappily misled you, I can only say that I am sorry you are so easily deceived."

"Easily deceived, Blanche Vavasour!" exclaimed Percival Holmwood, in a tone of suppressed fury; "but not easily baffled. I have staked the happiness of a life upon your truth. It is not yet too late to retract. Be my wife, Lady Blanche, and I will be your abject slave, your untiring adorer. All that wealth, which is almost limitless, can do to win you happiness, shall be done. All that love can desire, all that determination can compass, shall be yours. Betray me, and you make an enemy of one who will omit no means to work your ruin. Speak, Blanche; which is it to be, peace or war?"

Lady Blanche laughed a silvery, mocking laugh.

"War, Mr. Holmwood," she said. "Your proposition is too absurd; you cannot, surely, imagine that I would jilt the Duke of Arlington for a gentleman whose parentage is at least doubtful?"

Percival Holmwood sprang from his lounging attitude and drew himself to his fullest height. Again the vivid crimson rushed upward to his pale forehead; again the angry fire blazed in his large light eyes.

"Beware, Blanche Vavasour!" he said; "I am already your enemy; do not make me doubly so."

Lady Blanche had entirely recovered her presence of mind. She seemed to have regained her tranquillity from the moment her visitor had lost his.

"It is scarcely likely I should be false to my plighted faith to Gerald Mortimer," she said.

Percival Holmwood bent his flashing eyes with a scrutinizing gaze upon her face.

"Yet you were false to Hubert Monkton," he said, slowly, watching her as he spoke. "You did not hesitate to betray the poor artist. May I ask how he bears your desertion?"

"He is dead."

"Dead!"

"I have been informed so, Mr. Holmwood," answered Lady Blanche to the millionnaire's exclamation of surprise. "I cannot vouch for the truth of the report."

"Dead! He died suddenly, this young artist?"

"I believe so."

"What was the cause of his death?"

"I do not know."

Percival Holmwood drew a long breath, and walked towards the window; then, turning suddenly upon Lady Blanche, he said: —

"Hubert Monkton died upon the night of the 13th of October?"

The color faded from the lady's cheeks; once more she looked towards the door, as if she would have fled from the presence of her eccentric visitor.

"You seem better informed than myself, Mr. Holmwood," she said, recovering herself.

"Hubert Monkton died upon the 13th of this month," repeated the young man. "No newspaper has announced his death, no living creature has pronounced his name in my hearing, yet I know the night upon which he died. Farewell, Lady Blanche Vavasour; you have been pleased to allude to the obscurity of my parentage; you have not done wisely. I might have forgiven your falsehood to me, but I will never forgive your insult to the memory of the dead."

He hurried from the room. As he closed the door Lady Blanche Vavasour rose from her seat, and paced with rapid footsteps up and down the apartment.

"The missing letters!" she exclaimed once more. "All hangs upon those missing letters. Those once found, I can defy him,—I can defy the world."

In the second column of the "Times" for October the 18th, the day following that upon which the interview above described took place, a singular advertisement appeared.

This advertisement was worded thus: —

"The friends of the late Mr. Hubert Monkton (who was treacherously murdered) are requested to communicate with M. X., at the office of Messrs. Fisher and Fisher, Solicitors, Gray's Inn Place."

Lady Blanche Vavasour read this strange advertisement as she sat at the breakfast-table with her doting father.

CHAPTER XII.

AT ARLINGTON WOODS.

The favorite country mansion of the Duke of Arlington was situated in the county of Kent, within a few miles of the small town of Clampington.

This residence was a fine pile of building in the Elizabethan style, — a noble mansion, with a court-yard on one side, and an extensive garden on the other; and surrounded in every direction by a thickly timbered park, which had been open forest-land up to the reign of Charles the Second, by whom it was given to the Marquis of Arlington, — one of his Majesty's most devoted followers, who was elevated to the ducal rank soon after the Restoration.

The vast extent of forest land which the new duke received from his royal master was walled round by that nobleman's successor; but was still known in the county as Arlington Woods, by which name the estate is called to this day.

The duke, who was an able politician, rarely enjoyed the quiet repose of this delightful abode; but Arlington Woods was no deserted habitation; and the people who occupied it were beloved by all the neighborhood.

The occupants of the old Elizabethan mansion were Lady Augusta Mortimer and her daughter Adela, the widow and only surviving child of Lord Henry Mortimer, the younger brother of the duke; and the Honorable Theobald Mortimer, the only son of another brother, who had been peculiarly beloved by his Grace.

This Theobald Mortimer was heir presumptive to his uncle's title; but it was only to be expected that the duke would eventually marry, and the young man was quite prepared to see himself deprived of the succession.

He was only three-and-twenty years of age at the period at which our story opens, and he was perfectly happy in the society of his aunt and cousin, Lady Augusta and Adela Mortimer, and his tutor, Signor Luigi Malatesta.

Signor Malatesta was a Florentine exile, of noble extraction, who had been engaged by the Duke of Arlington to superintend the education of the nobleman's beloved nephew.

That education was now complete; no man could be more thoroughly well-informed, or more perfectly accomplished, than the Honorable Theobald Mortimer; but the Florentine still lingered at Arlington Woods, in accordance with the earnest solicitation of his pupil.

The attachment which existed between the two men appeared one of those romantic friendships which have united the heroes of classic history in the bonds of undying affection. Luigi Malatesta seemed never happy out of the society of his pupil; and a close observer would have perceived that the Florentine was terribly jealous of any creature who obtained the slightest hold upon the affections of Theobald.

He extended this jealousy even to Adela Mortimer, the first cousin of his pupil. The cousins had lived together from childhood; their amusements, their studies, had been alike shared; and the love which had united them in their earliest youth grew stronger with every year, until it culminated in the purest affection which could render a home blessed.

They were betrothed, with the hearty consent of Lady Augusta, and with the warm concurrence of the Duke of Arlington, Theobald's guardian.

The only individual in the household who seemed averse to this betrothal was Luigi Malatesta; and it was only a very acute observer who could have perceived his dislike to the course which events had taken.

The disciple of the great statesman Machiavelli was too well skilled in diplomacy to allow his pupil to discover his real sentiments.

"Your cousin is an adorable girl, my dear Theobald," he said, when the future union between the orphans was first discussed, "and you could scarcely have made a better choice; but I fear, when you enter the aristocratic world, as heir to the Duke of Arlington, you will be sadly tempted to forget your vows to Miss Adela Mortimer."

"Never!" exclaimed the young man, energetically. "I can never forget the dear girl who has been more than a sister to me."

"A sister!" repeated the Florentine. "Ay, there it is, my dear Theobald. I fear Adela Mortimer has been so like a sister to you that her image will scarcely be able to struggle against the impression made upon your heart by some lovely stranger, when, by and by, you become engulfed in the whirlpool of fashionable life. Ah, Theobald, would to Heaven that you could always remain in this lonely old mansion with your devoted uncle and pretty cousin! It would be better for you, my dear boy, far better."

It was in a tone of melancholy that Luigi Malatesta uttered these last words.

"But I have no wish to leave Arlington Woods, dear Luigi," answered the generous-hearted young man. "Nothing could be happier than our life here, and I have no wish to change it."

"Ay, ay, not now, perhaps; but the wish will come, Theobald; the wish will come."

"Never!"

"Not to-day, perhaps, nor yet tomorrow; but, sooner or later, the wish will come. When you are Duke of Arlington you will scarcely hide your strawberry leaves in this solitary Kentish mansion."

"Stop, Luigi!" exclaimed Theobald Mortimer, turning suddenly upon the Florentine. "I must beg that you never again speak such words as you have uttered. You know that I have never counted upon my uncle's title; and I neither hope nor wish to succeed to it. The Duke of Arlington is only forty years of age, the golden prime of manhood, and nothing is more probable than that he should marry and have sons of his own."

"And you would be glad to be best man at his wedding, I suppose?" said Signor Malatesta, with a covert sneer.

"I should be pleased to see my uncle take any step which would add to his happiness," replied Theobald, warmly.

The Italian bit his lip, and, turning away from his pupil, looked with a thoughtful gaze upon the wide sweep of wood and dale, lake and streamlet, which lay before the terrace upon which the two men were walking.

"And yet it would be a pity to lose Arlington Woods," he muttered; "to say nothing of two other estates, one in Derbyshire, and the other in Cumberland, and an income of eighty thousand a year. It seems too much to lose, too much to lose," repeated the Italian, speaking rather to himself than to his pupil. Then dropping his chin upon his breast he muttered in a lower tone, "And it shall not be lost!"

The life led by Lady Augusta Mortimer and the two cousins was a very simple one. They associated only with the few aristocratic families whose mansions were situated within reach of Arlington Woods, and with the Rector of Clampington, a gentleman by the name of Milroy, who was very much respected by his parishioners, and indeed by all who knew him.

Mr. Milroy was much attached to the two cousins, Adela and Theobald; but the young man did not respond very heartily to the rector's friendly feeling, but seemed rather to avoid his society.

The secret of this lay in the power which Luigi Malatesta exercised over his pupil; and the extent of that power is scarcely to be wondered at, when it is remembered that the Italian was one of that marvellous religious brotherhood, whose members have at different times held sway over the larger half of the civilized world.

Luigi Malatesta was a Jesuit.

Brilliantly gifted, patient, determined, intrepid, unscrupulous, and merciless, he was one of those men who hew their way from the quiet cloisters of a religious college to the throne of the Seven-Hilled City. He was one of those men whose souls can hold no other passion than ambition. He had been taught that for the glory of the Church of Rome all things were pardonable, nay, admirable; and he had learned his lesson well. He came to England an exile from his native land, and he threw aside the priestly garb without losing the priestly nature. He entered the household of the Duke of Arlington as tutor to the heir presumptive to the dukedom; and, as he rode beneath the stately avenue of oaks, upon the viewing, he determined to win that wide estate, that princely fortune, for the Church of Rome. He did not pause to think if it could be won; he did not stay to ponder upon how it might be done; but he clenched his slender hand until the sharp nails cut into the flesh of the palm, and muttered between his teeth: —

"*It shall be!*"

Luigi Malatesta found his pupil impressionable and enthusiastic. At the end of three years that pupil became a Roman Catholic.

Theobald Mortimer dared not confess, either to his uncle or to his aunt and cousin, that he had deserted the faith of his ancestors, who had been stanch Protestants ever since the

Reformation. He yielded to the subtle and insidious acquirements of his wily teacher; but his change of religion was a profound secret known only to himself and Malatesta, and this secret strengthened the influence of the Italian.

"Wait and be patient, Theobald," he would say; "the day is perhaps not far distant when you will be able to boldly confess your allegiance to the church of St. Peter, and, by some noble deed of self-sacrifice, inscribe your name upon the muster-roll of the saints. Until then, be patient. Conform in all appearance to the shallow formula of heresy; the church shall absolve you of the sin. Listen to the tedious sermons of the Clampington rector, and wait; wait till you hear the swelling anthems roll beneath the mighty roof of St. Peter's, while the many voices of the choristers hymn the praises of the blest."

His conversion to the Roman Catholic faith was the only secret which Theobald Mortimer kept from his future bride; and a dark cloud of sorrow often overshadowed his breast when he remembered that this secret made a gulf between him and his adored Adela.

Sometimes he felt inclined to recede, — to return to the belief of his boyhood; but it was too late! He had given himself into the power of one whose grasp was as the clutch of the tiger; and the links which bound him were fashioned of adamant.

Luigi Malatesta was five-and-thirty years of age, but he looked considerably older. The lines of thought or care marked his broad forehead, and there was a glassy look in his dark eyes which told of long and patient study. There was a nervous action in his thin lips which was peculiarly obvious when he was excited; and in moments of passion his sallow complexion would darken to a lowering blackness, as the sky darkens before the coming of a storm.

He was, however, usually very quiet, rarely raising his voice above the low and courtly tone most suitable to the polished circles in which he mingled; and it was difficult to believe that beneath the cold and studied calmness of his manner lurked the lava-flood of passion and of genius. Luigi Malatesta had never loved. He laughed scornfully at the lover's folly, and ridiculed the man who could be weak enough to yield to woman's influence. He declared that, to him, Love was an empty word which had no meaning, and Beauty the glittering toy made to please a fool.

"Let other men peril their souls for golden ringlets and sunny smiles," he muttered, as he rambled alone amid the lonely glades in the park, "Luigi Malatesta has a higher destiny."

Upon the evening of the 16th of October — the same evening as that upon which the Duke of Arlington met the shadowy white-robed woman in the empty house near Drury Lane — Lady Augusta Mortimer, Theobald, Adela, Luigi Malatesta, and the rector of Clampington were all assembled in the vast drawing-room at Arlington Woods.

This drawing-room was a large apartment with chimney-pieces and panelling of carved oak; a ceiling painted by Sir Peter Lely; and furniture of the style which was fashionable in the reign of Charles the Second. The walls were hung with portraits of the ancestors of the Duke of Arlington; brave cavaliers, lovely ladies, who had flourished in the days that were gone.

Lady Augusta sat at her embroidery at a small table, by which Adela and Theobald were also seated, looking over a book of water-color drawings. Mr. Milroy and the Florentine Jesuit were seated at the other end of the apartment.

"Bravo, dearest Adela!" exclaimed Theobald, as he selected one of the drawings. "Here is a magnificent sketch of the ruined tower in the glen, — the view which is such a favorite of my Uncle Gerald's. We must have your drawing painted, dearest, and hung in his dressing-room, before he comes to pay us one of his flying visits."

The rector looked up at the mention of the duke's name.

"You were speaking of your uncle, I think, Theobald," he said.

"I was, my dear Mr. Milroy; I was saying that we shall soon expect one

of his brief visits to Arlington Woods."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the rector; "then I shall try and be one of the first to congratulate him."

"To congratulate him," repeated Theobald; "upon what?"

"Upon his approaching marriage."

"His marriage!" exclaimed the little assembly simultaneously.

"Yes, my dear friends," repeated Mr. Milroy. "Is it possible that you have not yet heard of the duke's intended union with Lady Blanche Vavasour, the only daughter of the Earl of Templeton?"

The dark change of passion passed over the sallow complexion of Luigi Malatesta.

"It is some foolish gossiping report, circulated by the old maids of Clampington, I suppose," he said with a sneer.

"No, Signor Malatesta," answered the rector, sharply; "it is no village gossip, but an announcement in the 'Clampington Herald,' copied from the 'Morning Post,' which gave me my information. The Duke of Arlington and Lady Blanche Vavasour are to be married early next year."

Mr. Milroy took a newspaper from his pocket, and, seating himself at a table, against which the Florentine was standing, read aloud a copy of the same paragraph which Isadora Monkton had read to her cousin upon the occasion of the artist's disappearance.

Luigi Malatesta was short-sighted. He took up the eye-glass attached to his slender gold chain, and bent down to examine the newspaper.

"Let me see it with my own eyes," he muttered; "I will trust nothing but my own eyes; we must all be dreaming, surely. Let me see the words with my own eyes."

He took the newspaper from the hands of the rector, and gazed long and earnestly at the paragraph, as if he could scarcely realize the meaning of the words.

Then, drawing a long breath, he suffered the paper to fall from his hands. "I never thought of this," he murmured, in an undertone; "I never expected this."

The rector looked searchingly at the countenance of the Jesuit. "Signor Malatesta," he said, "you seem as much discomfited at this news as if you had been heir presumptive to the dukedom."

The Florentine smiled the most courtly of smiles. His complexion had by this time recovered its natural hue.

"I am sorry for my pupil's loss," he said.

"Nay, Signor Malatesta," replied Mr. Milroy, good-naturedly, "all is not lost yet. The duke may never have a son."

"Perhaps not," said the Jesuit; "or, if he have a son, that son may happen to die."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Theobald. "I have no ambition to inherit my dear uncle's title; and I am sure my darling Adela has no wish to be a duchess."

"No, indeed, cousin," answered the merry-hearted girl; "the wearisome routine of fashionable life would never suit me. I had rather scamper on my gray pony, Wildfire, to a picnic at the Glen Tower, than attend the most brilliant party in Belgravia."

The Florentine turned to Adela Mortimer with a strange smile.

"Make your mind easy, signorina," he said, gravely; "you will never be Duchess of Arlington."

There was a solemnity in his words which chilled the gayety of the young girl. It seemed as if the Jesuit had uttered some evil prophecy.

At midnight, on the 16th of October, Luigi Malatesta flung aside the voluminous curtain which hung before the oriel window of the chamber in which he slept, and looked out upon the wide landscape. "A noble estate!" he murmured; "a fair domain! a princely heritage! but may the race that owns it be soon extinct; and may the gold which is yielded by it pass into the coffers of the Church of Rome! Woe to the noble bridegroom! woe to the lovely bride, who cross my pathway! The end lies before, in the Palace of the Vatican, and I spurn the stepping-stone which can no longer serve for my footsteps!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FATALITY.

Adela Mortimer was a gay and genial creature, with whom life was a summer holiday, and to whom care and sorrow were as yet unknown.

She was not positively beautiful, but her smile was exquisitely bewitching; and her dark gray eyes, fringed with long black lashes, had a fascination which it was not very easy to withstand.

She was in the brightest bloom of girlhood, not yet eighteen years of age; and she had all that high-bred grace which bespeaks purity of descent, as well as softness of soul.

She was generous to a fault; candid, impetuous, affectionate, and was sincerely attached to her future husband; but she had no great partiality for the Italian, Luigi Malatesta.

Over her laughing nature the Jesuit's spell had little influence. There were times when his words sent a strange shudder to her heart; but those words were forgotten five minutes after they were uttered, and Adela Mortimer was her own bright, merry self again.

Upon the morning of the 17th of October the young girl was the first to appear at the breakfast-table, though not the first to rise, for it was Malatesta's habit to rise at daybreak, and spend the early morning in study.

Adela was alone in the breakfast-room when her cousin entered.

"Theobald," she exclaimed, "is it possible that you have forgotten the wonderful event which takes place today?"

"What event, dearest?"

"A great festivity, a glorious rejoicing, a merry-making for half the county of Kent. Can't you guess now, you stupid Theobald?"

"No, indeed, my darling."

"Why, have you forgotten Clampington Fair?"

"No, my dearest Adela; but surely you do not wish to join the country people in their rustic revels?"

"Indeed, I do, Theobald," answered the young girl, gayly; "why should we *be less happy now* in these amusements than we were a few years ago, when we were children? Let us be children always, Theo, if innocent pleasures are childish. I insist upon our all going to Clampington Fair; mamma, you and I, and even your grave old tutor, Signor Malatesta."

"That I am sure he will never consent to do," replied Theobald.

"There, you are mistaken in him, Theobald," said Luigi Malatesta, who had entered the room in time to hear the last few words; "for, wherever his pupil goes, he will accompany him. Clampington Fair, by all means, Miss Mortimer. I shall be quite at your service."

Adela laughed merrily, and shook hands with the Florentine.

"It is very kind of you to indulge our follies, Signor Malatesta," she said; "but we will take care that you will enjoy yourself at the fair. We will take you to see all the wonders; and, above all, I am determined to witness the representation of a new and original drama, performed by Mrs. Margaret Flipson's troop of unequalled tragedians and comedians, and entitled 'The Mountain Spectre; or, the Bleeding Finger.'"

Luigi Malatesta smiled, but there was no mirthfulness in his smile. The little party assembled at the breakfast-table, and two hours afterwards Adela Mortimer had mounted her pony, and cantered away under the overarching branches of the oaks, attended by her cousin, who was mounted on a thorough-bred, given him by his uncle, the duke.

Lady Augusta and the Florentine followed in an open carriage. The business of the fair had begun in good earnest when the aristocratic party from Arlington Woods entered the alleys between the booths. Adela Mortimer looked very bewitching in her small black velvet hat and bright scarlet plume; her close-fitting riding-habit of gray cloth and tiny linen collar encircling the slender throat. She threw the skirt of her habit across her left arm, and; slashing her little gold-handled whip in the other hand, walked by her cousin's side.

Mother Flipson's troop was assem-

bled upon the platform in front of the gaudily painted show as Adela and Theobald reached the open space before the principal booths; but Aurora was not amongst the performers.

The young girl was waiting inside to enact her part in "The Mountain Spectre."

A little to the right of Mother Flipson's booth, Mr. John Primmins stood upon the little platform outside his travelling van, holding forth to the delighted rustics.

The Cheap Jack's practised eye caught the advancing figures of Adela and Theobald.

"Now, I see a young lady a-comin'," he exclaimed, "which is the nicest and prettiest young lady as ever was! I don't know her to speak to, bless her dear heart! but I know as much as that, for I can read it, every bit, in the glance of her bright hi; and I've got a pretty little riding-whip here, which, I know, will suit that sweet young lady nicer than ninepence."

Mr. Primmins dived into his miscellaneous collection of goods as he said this, and reappeared with a little gilt-handled riding-whip.

"Here it is," he said; "the wery hidentical flewt, which, if aint hexactly a flewt, it's a far more useful hartikle; real gold-handled riding-whip, set with real hemeralds, every one of which is exactly three times and three quarters the value of the Ko-hi-noor; a riding-whip which is warranted to make the slowest pony go upwards of a mile a minute, which was never done before by any 'osses except Eclipse and the Flyin' Childers. You've nothin' to do but to flog a 'oss with this here whip, and he'll win the Derby before you knows where you are. Tattenham Corner aint nothin' to the jockey what's got this whip. Now, what shall I ask that pretty young lady for this beautiful whip? Shall I say half a sovereign? Well, I won't say half a sovereign, — I'll say nine and six, — I'll say eight and six, — I'll say eight shillings, — I'll say seven and six, — gone, — and there it goes for the greatest bargain as ever was," he added, as Theobald mounted the steps and paid for the little toy, which would have cost about sixpence in any ordinary shop.

"Won't the young lady haccept a glass of six-ale to drink my 'ealth?" asked Mr. Primmins, as Theobald handed the whip to his cousin.

Adela Mortimer laughed merrily at the Cheap Jack's polite offer. The cousins were well known by all the Clampington people, and heartily beloved; for their names were associated with many a boon and blessing to the poor.

Adela and Theobald felt, therefore, that they were amongst those who loved them, and were as much at home as if they had been in their own drawing-room.

"All in to begin!" shouted the clown, as the rustics mounted the steps before Mother Flipson's booth, and paid their hard-earned coppers to the old woman herself, who sat by the side of the curtained doorway leading to the interior of the booth.

"All in to begin, and positively about to commence! Walk up, ladies and gentlemen; walk up! Come and see the new and original drammer, hentitled, 'The Mountain Spectre; or, the Bleeding Finger!' with real blood, which is drawn fresh for every performance from a gentleman who is kept on purpose to 'ave his throat cut hevery three quarters of an hour! Walk up, ladies and gents; walk up! Them what hesitates is lost, as the young man said to the young lady, as she was steppin' across the platform into the 'alf-penny steam packet."

By this time the cousins were joined by Lady Augusta and Luigi Malatesta, who had walked more slowly than Adela and Theobald.

"Now, dearest mamma!" exclaimed the merry-hearted girl, "we are going to see an original drama; much more original, I dare say, than anything we saw last year at the London theatres; so come along, mamma, Theo, and Signor Malatesta, for I mean to treat you all, as the admittance to which is the immense sum of sixpence. Now, my dear old lady, four tickets for your dress circle, if you please," cried Adela, mounting the steps and offering a handful of silver to Mrs. Flipson.

The old woman stared at the money offered her.

"Tickets for four, miss," she said.

"Yes," answered Adela; "perhaps I've given you a little too much for them. Never mind, you can divide the surplus money amongst your company."

The clown, who was a witness to this proceeding, clapped his hands joyously.

"Bravo, miss!" he exclaimed; "if heverybody was like you, the British drammer wouldn't be where it is, and I should be at Drury Lane. Make way there, for this here party!" roared the clown, pushing aside the rustics, and retreating backwards before Adela and her friends, bowing at every step, as if he had been doing the honors of the establishment to royalty itself. "This way, my sweet young lady," he said, ushering Adela to the front seats. "You and your friends will find this the most haristocratic part of the house. There aint half as much orange-peel and Barcelona nut-shells hereabouts as there is anywheres else; and when her gracious Majesty pays us a visit, this is the werry bench as she sits on, and a sweet, haffable crittur she is too. 'Tomkini,' she allus ses to me, 'now, don't you be too funny to-day, — don't, Tomkini, don't do it, unless you wants to see me and the rile princesses bust before your werry eyes.' Them is her words, miss, with the hactual pronunciation. I'm reyther a good mimic, and you might almost think it was Queen Victoria a-speakin' to you."

Lady Augusta took her seat by her daughter's side upon the little bench, and the Florentine and his pupil stood behind the two ladies, in order to get a better view of the performances.

The clown, "Monsieur Tomkini," as he was called in the bills, ran away to change his dress, and reappear as Baron Montenogo, the villain in "The Mountain Spectre." The members of the orchestra tuned their instruments, and began to play "The Last Rose of Summer," to which the rustic audience listened with open mouths. Five minutes afterwards a bell rang, and the little, ragged green baize curtain rose, *revealing a dirty-looking* stage, and a scene which was meant to represent a mountain pass. The Baron Montenogo was the first to enter. He wore a red cotton velvet hat, which was about three times too large for him, and a dirty white feather; a rusty-black cloak, and boots which very nearly reached his waist, and which were made of the largest size known, in order that they might fit every member of Mrs. Flipson's company.

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed the baron; "my lov-a-ly ward, the Princess Rondaletia, refuses to become my bride. She loves the low-born peasant, Rhodomontes, but she shall not be his. No, no; she shall choose between us, — Montenogo or death. Ha, ha! — death, or Montenogo. But, softly — she comes!"

The baron drew aside and made way for the princess.

The character of the princess was that which had been assigned to Aurora, the adopted daughter of John Primmins. The young girl was dressed in a tawdry costume, composed of faded and dirty blue satin, trimmed with tarnished gold lace and spangles: but even in this gaudy attire she looked lovely as the morning.

The rouge which she wore heightened the lustre of her large hazel eyes; her ivory throat and shoulders were bare, and her rich clustering curls fell over these snowy shoulders and dropped below her waist. Her exquisitely rounded arms were bared, and the marble whiteness of her skin might have been envied by many a duchess.

As the young girl entered upon the scene, Luigi Malatesta started as if he had been shot, and, clutching nervously at his glass, lifted it to his eyes and gazed earnestly at the actress.

"Fatality!" he muttered, "fatality! The one face which I fear! the one face which, of all others upon this earth, could turn me from my purpose and lure me to destruction; to find it here! — to find it here!"

He sighed wearily, and dropped the glass from his eye; but he could not withdraw his gaze from Aurora, who played her part in the absurd vessel drama naturally and prettily, impar ting

grace of her own to the ridiculous words which were given her to speak.

Luigi Malatesta's agitation was not unobserved by his pupil.

"You are pale, Signor Malatesta," said Theobald; "has the heat of this booth affected you?"

The Florentine put his hand to his forehead, as if to collect his scattered senses.

"A little, — perhaps a little," he murmured.

"Let us go into the open air, then," said Theobald. "You cannot suppose that I care for this senseless performance. We can return for mamma and Adela when it is over. Come out of the booth."

"No, no!" exclaimed Luigi, energetically; "not for worlds. I will wait until the last moment; I will wait until that wretched curtain falls and shuts her from my sight," he added, in an undertone.

"You cannot surely be interested in this trash, my dear signor," said Theobald, who was bewildered by the excited manner of his tutor.

"Interested!" exclaimed the Florentine, recovering himself. "No, no, indeed; that would be too absurd, — would it not? Let us leave the booth. I am ready; come, come, come!"

He snatched his pupil's arm, and, without pausing to speak one word of apology to Lady Augusta or her daughter, pushed his way through the crowd, and out of an opening in the canvas side of the booth. He drew a long breath as he emerged into the open meadow behind the caravan.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed, "thank Heaven, I have escaped! The madness, the witchery, is over. The spell is past; I can breathe again. But is the danger really over, or will the fatal madness return?"

Luigi Malatesta spoke in his native language, and he spoke beneath his breath; yet Theobald Mortimer overheard much of this extraordinary speech.

"My dear Signor Malatesta," he said, anxiously, "what in mercy's name is the meaning of this agitation?"

"It *means, Theobald,*" answered the Florentine, solemnly, "that there are madnesses which the wisest of us cannot escape. Do not listen to me; do not question me; do not watch me. I am mad to-day."

At this moment the noise within the booth proclaimed that the performances were concluded. Theobald Mortimer returned to fetch his aunt and cousin.

As the young man left his tutor, he perceived, with considerable anxiety, that large drops of perspiration were rolling down the sallow face of the Florentine; and that the nervous trembling of his mouth was peculiarly obvious.

When Theobald returned with Lady Augusta and her daughter, Luigi Malatesta had disappeared.

They sought in vain for him amongst the crowd, and, after an ineffectual search of upwards of an hour, returned to Arlington Woods without him.

It was late in the evening before the Italian arrived at the old mansion, and when he came he was pale and silent, and, after a few hurried words to Theobald, retired to his own apartments. He seated himself at his writing-table, and lighted the two wax candles which stood upon his morocco-covered desk.

"The letter must be written," he murmured. "The infatuation is stronger than life, — stronger even than ambition. I will resign all."

He drew a sheet of thin foreign note-paper from his pocket-book and wrote the following words: —

"I have seen the face which is my fate. I am no longer fit to serve you in England. Release me.

"LUIGI MALATESTA."

This was all he wrote.

He folded the paper, placed it in a thin envelope, and directed it to "The Superior of the College of Jesuits, Rome."

. . . . . .

For several days after the despatch of this letter the Italian was restless and uneasy. He shunned all society, and wandered away from the park early in the morning to return only long after dark.

Singular as his proceedings were, there was that in his manner which

forbade all questioning. Theobald Mortimer watched his tutor in silence. He dared not break that silence.

Eight days after the rural festival at Clampington, Luigi Malatesta received an answer to his letter.

This answer was even briefer than his own epistle.

It contained these words: —

"There is no release. Serve us to the end, or forsake us at the peril of your soul."

The Florentine gnashed his teeth and groaned aloud as he read this letter.

"No release!" he muttered, "no release! Neither is there any release from the fatal spell. The Church of Rome is a hard mistress, and the road to power is a terrible pathway. No matter, no matter; if I cannot *be*, I can at least *seem*."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LIKENESS.

Upon the day succeeding that upon which Luigi Malatesta received the letter from the Chief of the Roman Jesuits, and exactly nine days after Clampington Fair, the Florentine left Arlington Woods early in the morning.

The autumn day was cold and dull, for November had begun, and a grayish mist enveloped the landscape like a veil of floating vapor.

Luigi Malatesta little heeded the sombre aspect of the skies. With his gaze fixed upon the ground, he walked slowly through the quiet country lanes; his arms folded on his breast, his head bent, his marked eyebrows contracted in a thoughtful frown.

He walked thus for several hours, sometimes resting for a short time against some rustic stile, sometimes taking out his pocket-book and looking over some of the papers which it contained.

About noon he found himself at a considerable distance from Arlington Woods, and close to a quiet little village near Clampington.

This village consisted of only a few scattered cottages, a tumble-down old-fashioned little inn, and a general shop for the convenience of the few inhabitants.

In a grassy lane at the back of these few cottages, Luigi Malatesta seated himself wearily upon the trunk of a tree, which had been hewn down, and lay by the side of the leafless hedge.

"I will rest here," he said, and then with a bitter laugh he repeated, "Rest! Where shall I rest? When shall I rest? Heaven help me!"

He took some papers from his pocket-book. Amongst others the letter which he had received the night before from the Superior of the Jesuits. He unfolded the small slip of paper, and once more read the few words which it contained: —

"There is no release. Serve us to the end, or forsake us at the peril of your soul."

"And I would have served the sacred cause, patiently, unshrinkingly, faithfully," exclaimed the Florentine, "had I not beheld once more the face which is my fate. Fifteen years ago — fifteen years ago, when I was but twenty, with the fierce fire of ambitious hope burning in my breast, I beheld that fatal face, and the great purpose of my youth was shattered. I was bewitched — maddened. I dreamed only of those hazel eyes — that wealth of chestnut hair — the angelic beauty of that seraphic smile. Haunted by that loveliness, by day and by night, my studies became odious to me, my ambition was forgotten, and time alone and the resolve of an iron will restored me to myself. Fifteen years had passed, — fifteen long years, — and I thought that I had forgotten. The glorious future beckoned me onward to the pinnacle of success, when, in a wretched booth at a country fair, amid a crowd of gaping rustics, I once more behold the face which is my destiny and I am again a madman."

He said this in Italian, and as he uttered the last words he covered his face with his hands and abandoned himself to a gloomy reverie.

He was aroused by the joyous bark

ing of a dog and the sound of a sweet voice calling "Monsieur! Monsieur!"

He looked up with a gesture of terror. He had recognized the soft modulations of that voice.

A young girl was advancing from the other end of the grassy lane with a white French poodle gambolling by her side.

It was Aurora, the adopted daughter of Mr. John Primmins.

"It is the work of the demon," exclaimed Luigi Malatesta, with a dark frown. "It is the demon warring with the Church of Rome."

He made the sign of the cross and rose to depart. He stood aside for Aurora to pass him, but to his surprise she stopped and addressed him.

"I fear, sir, that I startled you just now," she said. "I was only calling to my dog."

Her voice and accent possessed a refinement which would have been charming in the highest lady of the land, and which seemed strange in the companion of a band of strolling players.

The dark, sallow tints of the Florentine's complexion had faded to a ghastly white; even his lips lost their natural hue. Aurora looked at him anxiously. His grave expression and careworn face made him appear almost an old man in the eyes of the girl of twenty.

"I am sure you are ill, sir," she said, looking at him with compassionate earnestness. "Pray come on to the village and rest. You seem as if you were going to faint away."

Her innocent interest in him sent a thrill of wild rapture through his heart. He recovered himself with an effort, and suppressed all outward appearance of emotion.

"It is nothing," he answered. "I am not strong, and have perhaps walked too far this morning. Surely I remember your face," he added, carelessly. "Did I not see you at Clampington Fair?"

"Oh, very likely, sir," answered Aurora, smiling. "I was there, and Monsieur was there; weren't you, Monsieur?"

The dog barked gayly, as if in answer to her question.

"How is it that I find you still in the neighborhood?" asked Signor Malatesta.

"Father and I are staying here for a week or two," she replied; "because there are very few fairs now, and he does not like me to go about in the winter. He is very, very good to me, and he fancies the cold weather may injure my health. So in the winter we rest,—at least I do; and we stay in some quiet little place like this, and father goes with his horse and cart into the towns on market-days and earns plenty of money."

"You are very fond of your father," said the Florentine.

"Indeed I am," answered Aurora, with enthusiasm; "I ought to be, for he is very kind to me."

"Not more kind than most fathers are to their children, I suppose," said Luigi Malatesta, coldly.

"Perhaps not, sir. But then with father and me it is different. But I forgot," she said, blushing, "you do not know."

"I do not know what?"

"That dear John Primmins is not my real father. He is only my adopted father; but he is as kind to me as if I were his own child fifty times over, and I love him as dearly; more dearly perhaps," she added, mournfully; "for I have so much more reason to be grateful to him."

The Florentine started violently as the girl revealed this secret; but he felt a sensation of relief in hearing it. He was glad to find that the being who had bewitched him was not the daughter of an ignorant rustic.

"I must hurry home," exclaimed Aurora. "Father will be expecting me. He let us out, Monsieur and me, for a morning ramble; but he will be angry if we stay too long."

She was turning to go, with a bright smile on her face, when the Florentine clutched her slender waist in his strong grasp, and pinioned her to the ground on which she stood.

"Stop!" he cried, suddenly; "my madness, my destiny, you shall not leave me thus!"

Aurora's cheeks blanched, and her large hazel eyes dilated as the Italian said this. She thought that he was mad. She tried to disengage herself from his iron grasp, and he laughed a mocking laugh at the feeble effort. The dog, seeing his mistress's terror, barked loudly.

"Silence your dog!" cried the Jesuit, fiercely. "I tell you, you shall not go till you have heard me, and heard the fatal influence which your face, and another face like yours, have had upon my life. Silence your dog, and sit down there." He pointed to the trunk of the tree.

True-hearted women are always brave. Aurora believed this man to be mad; but, after the first brief surprise and terror, she did not fear him.

"If I attempt to oppose him, he will only become the more violent," she thought.

"Release my wrist," she said, with quiet firmness, "and I will obey you. I will do nothing while you keep me your prisoner."

She looked very lovely as she gazed at Luigi Malatesta with a glance of proud defiance in her bright, dark eyes. She wore a simple dress, of coarse woollen stuff, with a white linen collar, and a knot of bright ribbon fastened at her throat. Her long brown curls fell upon her sloping shoulders, and the rich masses of her dark yet golden-tinted hair were pushed away from her brow.

The Jesuit dropped her wrist.

"Be quiet, Monsieur; quiet, good dog!" she said, patting the head of the dog with her small hand; she then seated herself on the fallen tree.

"I am ready now, sir," she said, calmly, "to hear anything you may have to say to me."

Luigi Malatesta looked at her with surprise.

"There is noble blood in your veins," he said, fixing his burning black eyes upon her pale face; "for you have the courage of one who is the scion of an ancient race. Would that I could fathom the mystery of your birth!"

She looked at him with a mournful smile as he said this.

"I seek to know nothing," she murmured, "except the fate of my mother. Ah, what happiness, if she still lives, to be clasped to her breast!"

"Tell me," said the Florentine, "how came you to be adopted by this John Primmins?"

Aurora told the simple story which she had heard from the Cheap Jack.

"And did he make no efforts to find your parents?" asked Luigi Malatesta.

"He did at the time, and all inquiries failed to discover anything."

"And he has made none since?"

"None. Why should he?" asked Aurora, simply. "He does not wish to lose me, and we are very happy together."

"Child! child! you do not know what you are talking of!" exclaimed the Italian, with sudden energy. "I tell you, I know that you are the daughter of a noble race."

"But how do you know this?"

She smiled incredulously as she spoke, and the Jesuit — accustomed to fathom's men's most secret thoughts — read the meaning of that smile.

"You think me mad," he said; "and I have given you reasons to think so; but you will find by and by that you are mistaken. I tell you that I know you come of a noble family, for I have seen your mother."

"My mother! O Heaven!" exclaimed Aurora, clasping her two hands upon her heart, as if to still the tumult of sudden emotion. "O sir, what do you mean? Do not, for pity's sake, trifle with me. It is too cruel."

"I will not, child. I tell you frankly that I do not know whether your mother is still alive; much less do I know where she is. She may have died years ago. I do not even know her name or her rank. Yet I have an inward conviction that I have seen her."

"O sir," murmured Aurora, piteously, "you speak in enigmas. Do not torture me."

"I will speak more plainly," replied the Jesuit, quietly. "I will tell you all, child, and then have pity upon me, if you can, for I need your pity."

Aurora looked at him, breathless with agitation, hanging upon his

words as if life or death were in their syllables. "Listen to me," he said, gravely; "when I saw you in the booth, at Clampington Fair, I felt that the purpose of my life was destroyed, and I could have wept aloud with the pangs of despair; for I am an ambitious man, and a noble career lies before me, if I do not suffer myself to be led away by the madness which men call love."

Aurora started.

"Love!" she murmured, wonderingly.

"Yes, love. That madness which has many forms and but one name. To me it has been Fatality. A heart of marble is not less passionless than mine; a heart of marble could scarcely feel the influence of woman's beauty less than I have felt it, except on two occasions,—the first time in Rome, fifteen years ago; the second time a few days since in the booth at the fair. Then again after the lapse of fifteen years I saw the face which is my destiny."

"What do you mean by these strange words?" exclaimed Aurora.

"I will tell you," answered Luigi. "Fifteen years ago I was a young man at Rome. I had but lately entered the solemn office of the priesthood. Men told me that I was clever, I knew that I was ambitious, and I swore by my own soul that I would not rest till I attained the highest title which the Church of Rome can bestow on her chosen children. The *highest*, girl; do you understand? I may be an old man when the hour comes, I said, but it shall come. I knew that knowledge was power, and I devoted myself to study. I shunned all companionship. I stood utterly alone in the world; and I steeled my heart against my fellow-men. I had no thought beyond the one ambition of my life; and I did not believe that aught but death could turn me from that ambition, when one day, as I was about leaving the obscure and humble little chapel in which I had officiated as priest, a lady entered alone. I stood aside in the shadow of the porch in order to allow her to pass me. In that moment I saw her face, and in that one glance I was lost. I bowed to the hand of fatality; and, unseen by her, spell-bound, bewildered by her beauty, I re-entered the chapel, and creeping behind one of the stone pillars which supported the roof, I watched her from my hiding-place. I will not describe her face to you, child."

"Why not?" asked Aurora, wonderingly.

"Because it was as like your own as its shadow in your glass."

"And you think that this lady was my mother?"

"I do."

"For no other reason than that she resembled me?"

"The resemblance was too extraordinary to be accidental," answered the Jesuit; "besides which I have another reason for my belief, which I will tell you by and by. I saw at once that the lady was not a Catholic, and that she had merely come to view the interior of the chapel. She was alone, and she was dressed in the deepest mourning. She was older, by a few years, than myself; and the beauty of her face was subdued by an expression of melancholy which never left it. When she quitted the chapel I followed her; for I was as one under the influence of some magnetic power, and I scarce new what I did, or whither I went. She left the busier streets and walked towards the suburbs of Rome, where she stopped at a little wooden gate, in a high wall that surrounded the gardens of a villa which I knew was usually occupied by strangers who came for a brief season to Rome. As she stopped at this gate a beggar addressed her; she answered him with compassionate kindness in Italian, but I could hear from her accent that she was English."

"Oh, tell me her name!" exclaimed Aurora; "tell me only her name, and, with no better guide than that, I will search the world through till I find her!"

"That is part of the mystery of my life, child," answered the Florentine, gravely. "I could never discover her name. I loved her! I never left Lord Do you know what it is fondly Blanche Valove? Sin, death, eternand ordered the

I knew all this, and yet I loved her. I haunted the neighborhood of the villa where she lived. I could learn nothing respecting her; for she was served only by English servants, with the single exception of a French courier. He could or would tell me nothing. 'He had been engaged in Paris,' he said, 'by the lady, whose husband had died a few months before in that city.' She was a widow, therefore; free to marry whom she would, but not free to marry a priest. This man declared that he could not tell me the surname of his mistress. She was always addressed and spoken of as Madame Marie; and she was travelling in order to recover her health, which had been shattered by some terrible sorrow,— a sorrow connected with the loss of a child. More than this I could not extort from him. I saw her constantly, unnoticed by her; for how should she stoop to observe the black-robed priest whom she met in her rambles, bending over his breviary and apparently absorbed in religious meditation? I saw her every day, and every day I loved her more wildly, more devotedly, until at last my love grew madness, and consumed me with a devouring fire. Within a month of my first seeing her, she left Rome. I went one morning and found the villa deserted. This shock was too terrible for me. Hopeless, mad, as my love had been, I had been more than blest in beholding the idol of my secret worship. She was gone, and I yielded to the full agony of my despair. I was stricken with brain fever; and for months was a prisoner to my bed, unable to study, unable to think, crushed and hopeless. Time passed. The scar healed, but the wound still rankled deep in my inmost heart. I returned to my studies. I devoted my soul to ambition and ambition alone. I had forgotten, and I was almost happy, when less than ten days ago I saw you at Clampington Fair, and I felt that the hand of fate was upon me. Ah, child, how little can you understand our misery! I am a priest, and yet, madman that I am, I dare to love."

"Do you?" exclaimed a loud voice close behind the Florentine, who stood with his back to the hedge, bending over the drooping form of Aurora, who had listened, intently absorbed by his strange narrative. "Do you?" repeated Mr. John Primmins, springing through a gap in the hedge and planting himself before the Jesuit. "Then I may *re*quest that you'll take your affections elsewhere, for they're not wanted in this direction."

Aurora rose from the fallen tree and clung lovingly to John Primmins.

"Dear father," she murmured, "is it you?"

"Yes, my lass, and time it was me," answered Mr. Primmins. "When priests comes, calling theirselves madmen, and makin' love to pretty girls, it's high time for them pretty girls' adopted parents to look alive and keep their eyes open. What's this furreneering gent been a-saying to you, Aurora? Nothing that he didn't ought, has he? If he has, so help me tater, I'll—"

"No, no, dear father," cried Aurora, pleadingly. "The gentleman has said nothing to offend or wound me. He is a priest, and his sacred office is the pledge of his honor. He thinks that he saw my mother, long, long ago, at Rome."

"Saw your mother at fiddlesticks," exclaimed the Cheap Jack. "How could he see her at Rome when she deserted you at Croydon Fair? That's wery like a whale, as we say in the classics. Come along with me, Aurora; I've been listenin' to his nonsense for the last quarter of a hour. Don't you listen to him, my dear," he whispered to his adopted child, "he's only a blessed *lunnatic*, and he don't know what he's talkin' about. Come along my love. Good-morning to you, sir."

"Stop, stop, dear father, but for one moment," murmured Aurora; "let me ask him—"

"Ask him if he sees any green in our eyes, my love," said the Cheap Jack; "that's the best question you can ask him."

He hurried his adopted daughter

She looki the solemn barrier of the smile as hen all human sympathies.

away, leaving the Florentine looking with a yearning gaze after the bright face which he called his destiny.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STOLEN LETTER.

The Duke of Arlington consulted his solicitors upon the extraordinary scene which had taken place in the empty house in the court near Drury Lane; but these gentlemen, clever and experienced as they were, could do nothing to help him. The house had been examined at their direction; and the panels of the room in which the duke had seen the White Phantom had been sounded, but with no result. There was a trap-door in the ceiling, but there was no visible opening in the wall; and it was through the wall that the duke had seen the shadowy form disappear.

The affair was buried in mystery, and the solicitors, sound men of business, were inclined to think that the Duke of Arlington had been deluded by some feverish dream.

The conduct of Lady Blanche Vavasour had entirely set at rest any faint suspicion which Gerald Mortimer might for a moment have entertained respecting her. How could he doubt one so bright and beautiful? Was it not a sin to disbelieve in the innocence of so fair and lovely a creature? "Her angel face seemed to reproach me for my mad folly," said the duke, as he reflected upon the interview between Lady Blanche and himself. "But I will show her that I can trust her. I will prove to her that I am not so base as to suffer myself to be influenced by a vile conspiracy against our happiness."

To the surprise of Lady Blanche Vavasour, Gerald Mortimer waited upon the Earl of Templeton, and begged as an especial favor to himself that, instead of being deferred till the ensuing spring, the marriage should take place immediately.

"But, my dear Gerald," exclaimed the earl, "surely you would not wish such an important ceremony to take place just now? London is a desert, and we shall have no one to assist on the occasion."

"No matter," replied Gerald Mortimer; "I care not how quietly our union is celebrated. I wish for neither pomp nor grandeur; but I have an especial reason for wishing to make Blanche my own without an hour's delay."

"But why so, Gerald?"

"Because there are wretches so base as to ask me to doubt her. When she is my wife they will scarcely dare to visit their vile malice upon the Duchess of Arlington."

"You are a noble fellow, Gerald," exclaimed Lord Templeton, with emotion; "and I ought to be grateful to Providence for such a son-in-law. But who can have dared to traduce my daughter? What wretch can there be, vile enough to be the enemy of one so lovely and innocent?"

"Ay, my Lord, there is the secret," answered Gerald. "It is her beauty that has doubtless made her enemies. No hatred is so dire as that which is born of envy. Say that you will let me make her mine without an hour's unnecessary delay?"

"I love you too well to refuse you anything, Gerald," replied the earl. "Win her consent to this hurried union, and I promise you mine."

The duke had little difficulty in prevailing upon Lady Blanche to comply with his request. A crimson flush mounted to her delicate face, and the light of triumph flashed from her eyes as she heard his prayer.

For a few moments she affected to oppose his wishes, then, yielding with a grace which made her lovelier than ever, she murmured, sweetly: —

"What can I deny to you, Gerald, when I love you so dearly?"

The duke was enraptured with her tender words.

"Ah, dearest," he exclaimed, proudly, "if you have secret enemies, I will prove to them that love is stronger than hate."

When Gerald Mortimer left Lord Templeton's house, Lady Blanche Vavasour rang the bell, and ordered the

servant who answered her summons to send Philip Howland to her.

"I shall be a duchess sooner than I expected," she murmured. "Who will dare to assail me then?"

The door was cautiously opened, and Philip Howland entered with a soft footfall, which made no sound upon the thick carpet of velvet-pile.

"You desired to see me, my lady," he said, respectfully.

"Yes. I am about to be married,—much sooner than I had expected."

"Immediately?"

"Yes; almost immediately."

"Your Ladyship will be good enough to transfer me from my present service to that of the Duke of Arlington?" asked the footman.

"You will be transferred to *my* service," answered Lady Blanche; "and I shall be your pay-mistress. You will find me a liberal one."

"Your Ladyship is very good. Is there anything else?"

"Yes; those letters."

The footman shook his head doubtfully.

"They must be had, Philip Howland; at any cost they must be had! There is no peace for me on this earth while those letters are in existence; above all, while they are in possession of another. If they were not upon the person of Hubert Monkton, on the night of — on the night of the business which I entrusted to you, they must have been in the possession of some one else — of Isadora Monkton, perhaps. I suspect that girl. I suspect her, Philip, — do you hear? Those letters must be found. There are thirteen of them. Thirteen letters! — for each of which I will give you a thousand pounds! Will that sum tempt you to find them?"

"It will tempt me to do my uttermost," answered the man, calmly; "I can do no more."

"Find them, then!" exclaimed Lady Blanche, with feverish energy; "find them at any cost — at any peril! I will requite you. I have no more to say. You can go."

She dismissed him with a haughty gesture of her hand, and retired to her own apartments.

Three days after, the marriage was appointed to take place. The marriage settlements were executed with marvellous rapidity by the lawyers of the duke and Lord Templeton; and on the eve of the wedding a dinner-party was given by the earl to the relatives of the bride, and a few distinguished guests who happened to be in London at that unfashionable season.

One of these visitors was Percival Holmwood.

Lady Blanche Vavasour's lovely face changed to an unearthly pallor as she beheld the young millionnaire among her father's guests. This man was the only being upon earth whose presence could inspire her with fear; and on this occasion of all others she dreaded to meet him.

He had loved and had been rejected by her; and he had sworn to be revenged. Why, then, was he here? It was vengeance, and not love, which brought him to that house. She felt this, and she trembled.

He watched her agitation with a mocking smile, but he did not force his society upon her. He sat apart from her amongst the other guests, until she took her place near the grand piano, when he approached her and bent over her while she sang.

Late in the evening Philip Howland entered the room carrying a packet of music, which he gave to Lady Blanche. As the footman delivered the parcel into the hands of his mistress, who was seated at the piano, the eagle eye of Percival Holmwood perceived him stoop over her and murmur a few words in her ear. He was near enough to catch the import of those words.

"I have a letter for you," the man whispered.

Soon after this Percival Holmwood left the drawing-room, and, descending the broad staircase, crossed the hall below.

One of the servants assembled there advanced to him to ask whose carriage he should call.

"None, at present," replied Mr. Holmwood. "I want to speak to you."

He drew the man aside, and, pointing to Philip Howland, who was lounging

with several other footmen in the hall, he said, in a whisper: —

"Take me to that man's room, and then send him to me, and I will give you a ten-pound note for your trouble."

"Certainly, sir," replied the footman, who thought it was some new caprice of the young millionnaire, who was celebrated for his eccentricities. "Step this way, sir; but I must warn you that Howland's room is at the top of the house."

"No matter; lead the way."

The man conducted Percival Holmwood across a large stone hall to the servants' staircase, which was at the back of the house. At the foot of the stairs he stopped to get a candle.

"Bring a dark lantern," said Percival; "it will serve my purpose better."

"But, sir—"

"Do as I tell you," interrupted Mr. Holmwood, "and I will double your reward."

The man bowed and obeyed, leading the way to a small plainly furnished chamber at the top of the house.

"What am I to say to Howland, sir?" he asked, as he left the room.

"Tell him that a gentleman wishes to see him," answered Percival.

The man descended the staircase. Five minutes afterwards another step was heard upon the stone stairs.

Percival Holmwood darkened the lantern, and as Philip Howland entered the room he was met by a well-aimed blow, which flung him stunned and unconscious upon the ground.

Then, shifting the screen from before the lantern, Percival examined the footman's pockets, and in one of them found a letter.

He tore this letter open, and, bending over the lantern, examined its contents.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EVE OF THE WEDDING.

THE letter which Percival Holmwood took from the pocket of the footman, Philip Howland, contained very little to reward him for the trouble he had undergone to obtain possession of it. It was written in a large, ill-formed, and scrawling hand, which was evidently that of an uneducated person; and it contained only these words: —

"SIR, — Miss Isadora Monkton left my lodgings upon the twentieth of October, taking with her all the property of her cousin, the missing gentleman. I do not know where she went after leaving my house. She was accompanied by a Spanish gentleman whose name I do not know. I have made the inquiries you desire, but can get no information as to her present residence. She and the Spanish gentleman went away in a cab; but I do not know the number of the cab, or the stand from which it was fetched, as it was brought to my house by the gentleman himself. I have searched the apartments as you desired, but can find nothing belonging to my late lodgers, *not so much as a scrap of paper*. I beg to thank you for your generous present, and am sorry I can be of no further use to you.

"I am, sir,

"Yours obediently,

"SARAH BIGSON."

The envelope containing this letter was addressed to "P. H.," Post-office, Half Moon Street.

"So, Mr. Philip Howland," muttered, Percival Holmwood, "you are employed by Lady Blanche Vavasour to communicate with the landlady of the house in which the missing man, Hubert Monkton, lived. The landlady is bribed to search the premises occupied by the artist. She searches and finds nothing, not so much as a scrap of paper. Those words are underlined in the woman's letter. She was therefore told to search for papers; what could those papers be but letters? — letters written to the missing artist by Lady Blanche Vavasour? letters, the existence of which is fatal to her, and which she believes still to be in existence? Beware, proud beauty! Link by link, and thread by thread, the net is weaving which shall destroy you. You scorned the love of Percival Holmwood. You did yet more, — you insulted the memory of the dead. That he would never forgive! No, never!" exclaimed the young man, with sudden passion, lifting his clenched hand above his head, with a solemn gesture; "never, so help me Heaven!"

He refolded the letter, concealed it in the breast of his coat, and then bent

down with the lantern in his hand to examine the prostrate footman.

"He is right enough," murmured Mr. Holmwood, after contemplating the face of the footman for one moment; "a dash of cold water and a few grains of sal volatile under his nostrils will bring him round. This night's work has not been wasted."

Percival Holmwood left the room and descended the narrow stone staircase. At the bottom he found the man who had conducted him to Philip Howland's room.

The scene which we have just described had not occupied more than ten minutes in its performance.

The footman took the lantern from the hand of the young millionnaire, and waited respectfully to conduct him to the hall of the mansion.

"You have not been very long, sir," he said.

"No," replied Percival Holmwood. carelessly. "My business with your fellow-servant was of no very great importance, and I must defer it to some better opportunity. The man hurried up the staircase at such a rate that he tripped himself up on the threshold of the door, and fell headlong into the room. I think he must have knocked his head against the angle of the chest of drawers, for he seems to have stunned himself violently. I have done all I can to bring him round, but could not find any water in the room. You had better send some one to him."

Mr. Holmwood's manner was so thoroughly natural as to disarm suspicion, and the footman was quite satisfied; more especially as, while speaking, Percival took his purse from his pocket and looked for the bank-note he had promised to the man.

"Here is some reward for your trouble," he said, handing the crisp new note to the footman; "and now be so kind as to take me back to the hall."

The man bowed, and led the way to the foot of the grand staircase.

"Will you return to the drawing-room, sir, or shall I call your carriage?" he asked.

"No," answered Percival Holmwood; "I walked here and shall walk back. Be so good as to fetch my overcoat from the anteroom."

The footman obeyed, and assisted Mr. Holmwood to put on the loose great-coat which covered his evening costume.

As the young millionnaire descended the steps before Lord Arlington's mansion, he stopped to listen to the sound of a silvery peal of laughter which floated through a partly opened window in the drawing-room.

Percival Holmwood well remembered that musical laugh.

"Laugh on, my Lady Blanche," he murmured; "laugh while you can. The day may come when it will not be so easy to assume the mirth which you do not feel. *The day shall come!*" he muttered between his set teeth.

When Philip Howland awoke from the swoon into which he had been thrown by the blow from Percival Holmwood's clenched fist, he found himself lying on the bed in his small chamber, with John Morris, the footman, who had received the twenty-pound note from Mr. Holmwood, at his side.

Philip Howland's hair was dripping with the water which had been thrown over him by his fellow-servant.

He opened his eyes and looked wonderingly about him. A candle was burning dimly on the little table, shedding a faint glimmer upon the face of John Morris, and leaving the corners of the apartment in obscurity.

"Where am I?" asked Philip Howland, putting his hand to his head, which still ached from the blow that had stunned him.

"In your own room, Phil, to be sure," answered Morris; "why, where should you be?"

One of the effects of such a blow as Philip Howland had received is the total obliteration from the memory of all events which have occurred immediately before the loss of consciousness.

The footman had quite forgotten the fact of his fellow-servant telling him that a gentleman desired to see him in his own room, and he had also forgotten the striking of the blow.

It must be remembered that the

lantern had been darkened as Philip entered the room, and that he had not seen Percival Holmwood's face.

"How did I come here?" he asked, looking scrutinizingly at the face of John Morris.

"How did you come here? Why, of your own free will, I suppose," answered the man, who guessed that Mr. Holmwood would scarcely like to have his name mentioned in the business.

"But I don't remember coming," said Philip.

"I dare say not, old fellow," replied his companion.

"Have I fainted away, then?"

"Why, not exactly. You must have tumbled down, striking your head against the corner of the chest of drawers, for I found you lying all your length on the floor when I came in. I suppose you've been having a little drop too much to-night, Phil."

"Drinking!" exclaimed Howland; "not I."

He paused for some moments, as if trying to collect his thoughts; then, turning to his fellow-servant, he said abruptly:—

"Go downstairs and fetch me a drop of brandy,—will you, Morris? I feel faint and queer after my fall."

John Morris assented good-naturedly, and left the room. As soon as he was out of hearing, Philip Howland sprang from the bed, darted across to the door of the apartment, locked it, and then searched in the pocket from which Percival Holmwood had taken the letter.

"Gone!" he exclaimed, with an oath. "Gone! No, no, it can't be."

He felt eagerly in all his pockets, one after the other.

"Who can have taken it?" he exclaimed. "Who?"

He reflected for a few moments, frowning darkly, and biting his under lip.

"It must have been John Morris," he muttered. "No one else has been with me since this confounded fall, and I know that I had the letter up to the time of my losing consciousness. Prying fool! What shall I do? Tax him with having stolen the letter, and insist on his returning it to me. No! That would be to betray its importance. He is too stupid to make any awkward discovery from its contents. My safety lies in saying nothing. There is nothing in the letter, which, taken by itself, can injure me or any one else."

He hastily unlocked the door, and threw himself again upon his bed. He was only just in time; for, as he did so, John Morris re-entered the room, carrying a decanter of brandy and a couple of glasses.

"Let's drink to the health of the bride, Phil," he said, laughing, "and the happiness of the bridegroom."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PHANTOM IN THE CHURCH.

It was an hour after midnight when the Duke of Arlington left Lady Blanche Vavasour. He had lingered longer than the other guests, and it seemed as if he could scarcely tear himself away from he society of the lovely girl, who was so soon to be his bride.

"To-morrow, Blanche!" he murmured, as he pressed her hand in both his own. To-morrow, my beloved, this dear hand will be mine. There'll be no more parting, no more estrangement; nothing, henceforward, but happiness and love."

If the dark veil of the future could have been lifted as the duke uttered these enthusiastic words, surely the noble heart of Gerald Mortimer would have been crushed by the iron hand of despair. The clock of St. James's Church struck one as the duke descended the steps of Lord Templeton's house.

His carriage was waiting for him; but he dismissed the coachman, and walked slowly homewards.

The night was foggy, but there was no rain, and a bright moon shone above the mists which hung about the earth. In the country these mists were white and vapor-like; in London, the fog was dark and thick.

The streets were almost deserted, and

the lamps glimmered faintly through the obscurity.

As the Duke of Arlington turned out of Piccadilly into Bond Street, he was startled by a hand being suddenly laid upon his shoulder.

He turned round, and found himself face to face with a man who wore a slouched hat and a thick great-coat, which entirely concealed his person.

"What do you want with me?" asked the duke, haughtily.

"You are Gerald Mortimer, Duke of Arlington?"

"Yes."

"And you are to be married to-morrow?"

"I am," answered the duke, with redoubled hauteur.

"May I ask by what right you allude to my private affairs?"

"I merely asked a question," replied the man. "I have a letter for your Grace."

"From whom?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Stay!" exclaimed the duke, laying his hand suddenly upon the shoulder of the stranger. "You arrest me at this hour of the night, and you speak to me of my intended marriage, which is known only to myself and the circle of my intimate friends. An idea strikes me that you are one of those who have plotted a conspiracy against the most innocent of women. Your accomplices escaped by their clever juggling, but you shall not fool me so easily. You shall come with me to the nearest police-office, and I will discover there who and what you are."

The man gave a shrill whistle, which was evidently a signal, and, wrenching himself by a violent jerk from the powerful gr[illegible] the duke, he ran into Piccadi[illegible]

Gerald M[illegible] pursued him; but at a hundred yards from the corner of Bond Street the man was met by a Hansom cab which had been, no doubt, lurking close at hand, and which approached in answer to his signal.

The stranger sprang into the cab.

For one moment he paused before seating himself in the vehicle, and flung a letter on to the pavement at the fe[illegible] the duke.

"You would do well not to attack those who are your truest friends," he exclaimed, as he did so.

The driver cracked his whip, and the horse tore off at a gallop. Gerald Mortimer had endeavored during this brief pause to ascertain the number of the cab; but he had been unable to do so, for the driver's horse-cloth hung before it.

The duke picked up the letter, and looked about him for a moment, hesitating what to do. He was not very far from Cavendish Square, but his feverish impatience would not allow him to wait until he reached home before ascertaining the contents of the letter which he had received in such an extraordinary manner. He could not see to read it by the light of a street lamp, on account of the fog. He walked for a few paces, and turned into one of the small streets leading out of Piccadilly.

A little way on, he saw the slanting rays of a light, which emanated from a chink in the doorway.

On approaching more closely, he perceived that it was the doorway of a small tavern.

The duke knocked twice at this door before it was opened; but at last his summons was answered by a man who seemed half asleep, and rather inclined to be surly.

But there was something in the nobleman's manner which commanded respect, even from those who were unacquainted with his rank.

"I am sorry to disturb you at so late an hour," he said, "but seeing the light under your door, I imagined that you had not yet gone to bed. Will you oblige me with a bottle of soda-water, and allow me to read a letter by the gaslight in your bar?"

"Certainly, sir," replied the man, politely. While he unfastened the wire about the neck of the soda-water bottle, the Duke of Arlington tore open the mysterious letter with a hand which trembled in spite of himself.

The letter was worded thus:—

"The Duke of Arlington has been warned once; but he has refused to listen. Will he hear a second warning, or will he rush headlong to the abyss of ruin that lies before him?

To-morrow will be too late. If he would listen, he must listen to night. The White Phantom will be in St. George's Church, Hanover Square, two hours after midnight."

This was all. There was neither signature nor date; the hand was cramped and formal, and was evidently disguised.

"Two hours after midnight!" repeated the duke.

Almost involuntarily his eyes glanced to the clock against the opposite wall.

"A quarter to two!" he said, aloud.

"Yes, sir," answered the landlord, "and we're pretty near right. A minute or two slow if anything, but pretty near right."

He was pouring out the soda-water as he said this.

"Never mind that, my good friend," said the duke, hastily, "I can't stop to drink it."

He flung half a crown upon the counter and ran out of the house without waiting for the change.

"It would be wiser perhaps to treat this vile scrawl with contempt," he thought, as he hurried through one of the streets leading towards Hanover Square; "but I must and will fathom the mystery, and in order to do this I must see this white-robed woman once more."

He could not repress a shudder as he remembered the phantom-like form which he had beheld in the obscurity of the garret near Drury Lane. Powerful as his intellect was, that shadowy figure had made a lasting impression upon his imagination.

The clock struck two as he approached the church, — that church which he was so soon to enter as a bridegroom.

All was dark at the front entrance. There was no living creature upon the broad stone steps or within the shadows of the porch.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, scornfully, "the conspirators could not go so far as to make this holy edifice the scene of their abominable plottings. I have been a fool to come upon so mad an errand."

He was descending the steps, and about to leave the church, when he remembered a small side door communicating with the body of the church, and often used by those who wished to enter the edifice without being seen by the crowd assembled to behold the wedding-guests.

He pushed towards this door, and perceived, as he approached it, the faint glimmer of a light upon the pavement.

The door was ajar, and a light was burning within the church.

"The conspirators are more daring than I thought," muttered the duke.

He pressed the door open and entered the edifice.

Two men were standing within the doorway, — one was the sexton who had charge of the church, the other was the man who had given the duke the letter.

The sexton had a lantern in his hand, which shed a dim and uncertain light upon the objects near, leaving the body of the church in total darkness, except in the space before one large window, through which streamed the struggling moonbeams which glimmered faintly through the fog.

"This is the gentleman whom I expected," said the man, whose face was quite concealed by the darkness of the church and the shadow of the brim of his hat. "You can wait in the vestry till we are ready to leave the church."

The sexton nodded and walked away, carrying his lantern with him.

The duke and the stranger were thus left in total darkness. There was no light whatever in the gloomy building, except the faint moonbeams streaming in through the large window.

"Why have I been summoned here?" exclaimed the duke. "What is the motive of all this juggling?"

The stranger's voice answered him from the further end of the building.

"You will see, presently," said the voice, in slow and solemn tones. "Look towards the moonlight below the western window."

The duke looked with a shudder of horror in the direction of which the man spoke.

Faintly visible in the struggling rays of the moon, he beheld the phantom-

like form which he had seen in the garret at midnight on the 16th of October.

He recognized the shadowy and indistinct figure; the white garments, the vapory outline.

An exclamation of terror burst from his lips, but he was a brave man, and he quickly recovered his presence of mind. He tried to rush towards the phantom, but he was stopped by a range of pews, which formed a barrier between himself and the shadowy form.

The church was strange to him, and it would have been utterly impossible for him to find his way to the moonlit window in the darkness. He was compelled, therefore, to remain where he was, separated from the phantom by the entire width of the holy edifice.

"Gerald Mortimer," said a voice, whose tones he recognized as those he had heard in the garret of the unoccupied house, — "Gerald Mortimer, you refused to heed my warning."

"I did," answered the duke, haughtily; "because your infamous words contained a vile slander against the most lovely and innocent of women. If, dissatisfied at the ill success of your first attempt, you seek a second time to succeed in your foul plot, I tell you that you waste time and trouble."

"You refuse, then, to be warned?"

"I refuse to listen to a shameful slander. If a voice from the grave were to tell me that Blanche Vavasour is unworthy of my love I would not believe the black falsehood."

"You would not believe the voice of the dead, if the dead could speak?"

"No!" exclaimed the duke. "I would not, so help me Heaven!"

"We will test your fortitude some day, Gerald Mortimer; the dead shall speak to you."

"Impious blasphemer!" cried the duke, "I will hear no more."

He turned to leave the edifice, but he remembered that he had heard a key turned in the lock of the door by which he had entered.

He was, doubtless, a prisoner; caught in the trap set for him by the enemies of the woman he loved.

"Listen, Gerald Mortimer, Duke of Arlington," said the voice of the White Phantom, — "listen, and be warned while there is yet time. To-morrow morning it will be too late, — to-morrow morning you are to lead your promised bride to the altar of this holy edifice. Be warned before it is too late, or live to repent your folly through a weary lifetime of misery. Blanche Vavasour is a murderess!"

"Liar!" cried the duke, almost mad with rage.

"She is a murderess. It may not have been her hand which struck the blow; but it was at her bidding that the blow was struck. Ask her the fate of her lover, Hubert Monkton, the artist. Bid her recall to her memory the events of the 13th of October. And then tell her that she is unworthy to be the wife of an honorable man. Remember! the step you are to take a few hours hence can never be undone. The vows you are to speak can never be recalled. Remember, and be warned while there is time!"

"Slanderer!" exclaimed Gerald Mortimer; "infamous slanderer! Blanche Vavasour was as high above Hubert Monkton, the artist, as the stars are above the earth. What was he to her?"

"Her lover!" answered the voice, solemnly.

"It is false!" cried the duke.

"Her wretched dupe, — the poor fool of her false smiles, — who was weak enough to believe that the fashionable beauty would descend from her high estate to wed the man whose only wealth was genius."

"It is false, I say," repeated the duke.

"It is true, Gerald Mortimer," answered the pitiless voice. "Ask Lady Blanche Vavasour for the missing letters, — the missing letters which contain her vows of constancy to the murdered man! It is true, Gerald Mortimer, and your own heart tells you that it is true!"

It was indeed so. A deadly coldness at the heart of the generous and trusting man seemed to tell him that there might be truth in the cruel words he had just heard. The excitement, the

wild passion, the indignant pride were too much for the strong man to bear. The moonlit window—the phantom form—the dark shadows of the pillared aisles swam before his eyes; he staggered forward for a few steps, reeled, and fell heavily to the ground, with his face towards the ceiling of the church.

The sexton heard the fall, and came, lantern in hand, from the vestry.

He stumbled over the prostrate body of the duke.

For a moment he was horror-struck, believing that the church had been polluted by some deed of violence, but on bending over the duke he found that he had only fainted.

"What's the meaning of this, I wonder?" he muttered. "I hope there's been no mischief done. I was wrong to consent to this business, and to take the other man's money. If it was found out I should get into a regular mess."

He held the lantern above his head, and looked about for the man who had bribed him to consent to the meeting in the church.

As he did so he caught sight of a dark figure going out of the side door, and at the same moment the door closed with a loud bang.

"Gone!" exclaimed the sexton; "that's queer! and he's left me with this man in an insensible state!"

He went into the vestry, and, after searching two cupboards, returned with a bottle of smelling-salts, and another bottle containing water.

He sprinkled cold water over the face of the duke, and put the smelling salts to his nostrils. Gerald Mortimer revived slowly, and, opening his eyes, looked about him.

"Ah, I remember!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet and looking towards the faint moonbeams; "I remember all! Where is she? Let me see her face to face in the broad daylight! I will no longer be the fool of this infamous conspiracy! Let me see her face to face in the light of day!—Where is she, man; where is she?"

"*She!*" said the sexton, in a tone of unmitigated astonishment. "There's been no shes here to-night. There's been nobody but the gent who wanted to meet you here, and persuaded me to get out of my bed to let you into the church. If the plate had been kept anywhere very easy to get at, I shouldn't have been quite so ready to oblige him, though he did give me something for my trouble."

During this speech the duke had recovered his tranquillity of manner, if not of mind, and he spoke with calm deliberation.

"Tell me," he said, "and tell me the truth,—you shall be well rewarded for your candor,—did any woman enter this church before I came in at that door?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"You are certain that no woman entered?"

"Well, sir," answered the sexton, "I shouldn't like to tell a story; so I won't say I'm certain. Because, you see, I can't; the church was as dark as pitch, except for a yard or so around my lantern, and the door was ajar. I can't take my gospel oath that nobody stole in at that door while me and the gent was standin' here waitin'. But all I can say is, if they did, I didn't see 'em."

"How long did you and the gentleman stand here before I came in?"

"Well, sir, it must have been nigh upon a quarter of an hour. It was half-past one when the gent knocked me up, and said he wanted me to do him a favor, and he'd pay me handsome for my trouble. He'd made a wager with another gent, he said, that he'd meet that other gent at two o'clock in the interior of St. George's Church, and the other gent didn't believe he could do it. And he offered me a ten-pound note, on condition that I come over here and let him into the church for half an hour, remainin' in the building myself all the time to see as all was right. I gave my consent, sir, though I didn't ought to have done it; for I'm a poor man with a large family, and ten pound is an objick to me."

"Had you never seen this gentleman before to-night?"

"Never to my knowledge, sir; but, to tell the truth, I didn't *see* him to-night, for his face was so muffled up by

the comforter about his chin, that he might have been the Emperor of Roossia for aught I knowed."

The duke sighed wearily. He dropped a couple of sovereigns into the sexton's hand, and, bidding him good-night, left the church.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MERCHANT'S DAUGHTER.

On the same day as that on which the friends of the Earl of Templeton assembled to do honor to his daughter on the eve of her brilliant marriage, a young man lounged upon the pavement of the Strand, opposite to Somerset House, watching the passing omnibuses and evidently waiting for some particular vehicle.

He was plainly dressed, but his costume, thongh scrupulously economical in all its details, was evidently that of a gentleman. He was good-looking, but his face was pale and careworn, and his upper lip had a restless motion, which gave an unpleasant peculiarity to his countenance.

The reader has seen him before, for he is the young chemist who answered the duke's interrogatories upon the night of the 16th of October.

An impatient frown contracted his strongly marked eyebrows, as he watched the passing vehicles. He took out his watch, a plain silver Geneva, and looked at the dial.

"Two o'clock," he muttered; "it will be three before I get there, and I must be back by five, or I shall be assailed with jealous hints and dark suspicions. A curse upon my wretched home and all belonging to it!"

He hailed a Putney omnibus, which approached as he uttered these words, and, seating himself in the darkest corner of the vehicle, abandoned himself to reflection, which, from the dark shadows that overspread his haggard face, was evidently of a gloomy character.

He alighted from the omnibus in the neighborhood of Walham Green, and walked rapidly in the direction of a narrow lane leading out of a by-road.

At the bottom of this lane the young man paused at a wooden door in a brick wall, which surrounded a large but dilapidated-looking house, the upper windows of which were visible above the wall. This house was massively built, large and handsome, but the gloomy situation in which it was placed gave it an air of desolation that was considerably increased by its neglected and comfortless aspect.

The young man rang a bell which hung by the side of the wooden door, and waited patiently for an answer to his summons. After the lapse of about five minutes, a slow footstep was heard shuffling over the flagged court-yard between the house and the door.

The door was opened by an old woman, who looked cautiously out at the visitor.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "I thought nobody else would be comin' here at this time of the afternoon. You're to come in, I suppose."

"Yes, Barbara, if you please," answered the young man, passing the woman before she had time to intercept him, and walking towards the door of the house. "Is Miss Lilian at home?"

"Why, of course she's at home," replied the old woman; "where should she be but at home, I should like to know?"

The visitor entered the gloomy hall of the old house, and knocked softly at a door on the left of the entrance; a harsh voice from within answered: —

"Come in."

The young man opened the door and passed into the apartment. It was large and handsomely furnished, but, like the rest of the house, it had a gloomy aspect. It was lighted by two windows which reached from the ceiling to the ground, but the high wall which surrounded the court-yard threw its dreary shadow upon all.

There were three persons in this room, — a woman, seated in an armchair at one end of the apartment, a man of about fifty years of age, and a young girl, who sat at one of the windows, occupied with a piece of embroidery. The woman had once been handsome; her hair was raven black,

her features regular, her eyes large, dark, and lustrous; but there was that terrible blank in her ashy face which blots out all beauty. The mind was wanting in that haggard countenance. It was impossible to look at this woman without discovering the truth. She was mad.

The man was tall and thin, with an angular, bony figure, and a face whose harsh expression made it almost repulsive. The girl was about twenty years of age. She, too, had black hair and eyes; and in her youthful beauty it was easy to trace a strong resemblance to the faded loveliness of the elder woman.

She rose suddenly as the young man entered, and approached to meet him.

"Ah, Joseph," she exclaimed, "you have come at last! Truant, deserter, I thought we should never see you again."

The young man, whose name was Joseph Maldon, took the girl's hand, and, bending over it, pressed it to his lips.

"I was here the day before yesterday, Lilian, dearest," he murmured.

"But not yesterday," answered Lilian. "What were you doing yesterday?"

"I was attending my patients," Joseph Maldon replied, gravely. "You forget, Lilian, that I have a profession, and a serious one, to occupy my time; and that if I neglect that, it will be long before I have a home to offer my future wife."

"What of that?" said the young girl, impatiently, "I am rich enough for both of us. Am I not, papa?"

"Yes, yes, Lilian," answered the harsh voice of the elderly man, who was called Andrew Burton; "you're rich enough, Lilian, but you don't suppose I'm going to let you marry a pauper for all that."

Joseph Maldon drew himself to his fullest height, and looked proudly at Mr. Burton.

"Nor will I ever ask your daughter to marry me," he said, "until I am in a position to do so."

"But why should you slave yourself to a shadow, Joseph?" exclaimed Lilian. "I tell you again that I am rich. I shall be of age in another twelvemonth, and I shall do what I like with my money, because it is not given to me by papa, but left to me by a gentleman whom I never saw, — Sir Harvey Edgecombe."

As the young girl pronounced this name, the woman, who had sat in a listless attitude, silent and unmoved, ever since Joseph Maldon entered the room, suddenly lifted her head, and convulsively clenching her wasted hands, murmured, in a voice of terible melancholy: —

"Revenge! revenge! revenge!"

There was something awful in her slow and solemn utterance of this thrice-repeated ejaculation.

Lilian Burton hurried to the wretched woman.

"Mamma," she said, gently; "dearest mamma, pray be calm."

The woman looked at her with a strange expression, and then recovering herself, as with an effort, said, with apparent tranquillity: —

"Did I speak, Lilian? I beg your pardon, my dear; my thoughts wander sometimes. Mr. Maldon, pray excuse me; I did not see you before."

She held out her hand to the young chemist, and saluted him with the easy grace of a lady.

"When is the marriage to take place?" she asked. "When am I to see my daughter a happy bride?"

Lilian Burton blushed; and Joseph Maldon seemed strangely embarrassed by the question.

There was little of a lover's enthusiasm in the tone in which he answered.

"I — I — am not yet in a position to marry," he said. "Miss Burton is convinced of my devoted affection for her, and she has consented to wait until I am better off."

"Wait until doomsday!" ejaculated Mr. Burton. "A surgeon in a poor neighborhood, such as yours, is not likely to become a millionnaire in a very great hurry. As Lilian seems determined to have you, and as she has money of her own, the sooner you make a match of it the better. I shan't be sorry to get rid of her. Girls are a deal of trouble, and a great expense into the bargain."

Lilian lifted her soft, dark eyes with

a reproachful gaze towards her father's face.

"I did not think I had been much trouble to you, papa," she murmured. "I have always been obedient, though you have never seemed to love me."

She drew her arm gently through her father's as she spoke, but a dark frown contracted his harsh features as she did so, and he repulsed her rudely.

"The sooner the marriage comes off the better," he said. "I am a business man, and I look at everything in a business light. I hate sentimentality."

Lilian Burton sighed and returned to her seat near the window. Joseph Maldon took a chair at her side, and bent over her, talking in a low voice, while she busied herself with her embroidery.

Mrs. Burton sat with her head resting on her hand, in the attitude of patient despondency. Her husband remonstrated with her in a grumbling undertone for the strangeness of her conduct.

Joseph had not long been seated by the side of his betrothed when the little timepiece on the mantel-shelf struck four.

He rose hastily at the sound of the strokes.

"I must leave you, dearest Lilian," he said; "I have a particular patient to see at five o'clock."

"Leave us so soon?" exclaimed the young girl; "I think you make your patients an excuse for giving us very little of your society, Joseph."

"No, indeed, Lilian," answered Joseph Maldon; "the patient whom I have to see to-night is very ill, and must not on any account be neglected."

"Is the person in danger?"

Simple and natural as this question was, the young man's eyelids fell, and his face grew paler than usual as he answered it.

"Yes," he said; "in great danger."

"Then go, Joseph," exclaimed Lilian. "I would not for worlds be so selfish as to keep you here when you can be of service elsewhere."

The young man lifted her hand once more to his lips, and, after bidding adieu to Mrs. Burton, who answered him in a listless and absent manner, he prepared to leave the room.

Andrew Burton followed him into the hall.

"When shall we see you again, Joseph?" he asked.

"To-morrow, I hope."

Mr. Burton looked at the young man for a few moments with a scrutinizing glance. His small eyes were of a grayish-green, and had something ratlike in their eager glance.

"To-morrow?" he repeated; "but suppose I don't see you to-morrow, or suppose by any accident I had occasion to write to you, where shall I direct my letters? You have never given us your address."

Joseph Maldon's face grew deadly pale.

"Have I not?" he said, hesitatingly. "That's strange; but I am little more than a student yet, and I — I — live in a very obscure neighborhood."

"Yes," answered Andrew Burton, with his eyes still fixed upon the face of the young man, "I understand that. But where is it that you live?"

"Near Drury Lane."

"Drury Lane is a wide neighborhood. I must have your exact address if I write to you."

The chemist looked at his interrogator with a dark frown.

"Kale Court," he muttered.

"Kale Court. What number?"

"Number Five."

"That will do; I shall know where to write to you, or to call on you if I have occasion."

Joseph Maldon started as if he had been shot.

"I had rather you would not call upon me," he said. "The place is poor and shabby, and — and — I should be ashamed for you to see me in it."

"Bah!" exclaimed Andrew Burton; "I've seen poverty before to-day! I am a man of the world — a man of business. I am not easily shocked. Remember, the sooner this marriage comes off the better for all parties. I am contented, and so is my —, so is Lilian. I wish for no idle delay. Good-night!"

He opened the door as he spoke.

Joseph Maldon bade him good-night and left the house. The old woman appeared at the door in the wall, to let out the solitary visitor.

"Strange!" said Joseph Maldon, as he walked in the wintry darkness towards the high-road. "There must be some mystery hidden beneath the quiet aspect of that family. The woman mad; the girl possessed of a fortune bequeathed to her by a stranger; the man rich, yet eager to marry his daughter to one of whom he knows actually nothing: there must be some trickery, some dark secret beneath this. No matter, so long as it enriches me. So long as it releases me from my dreary and wretched hovel, what have I to care for. But what is to be done? Burton has extorted my address from me. What if he does indeed come to Kale Court? He will discover all, and I shall be ruined." His dark eyebrows contracted, his lip quivered convulsively, and he walked on for some time with his head bent, and his arms folded upon his breast.

By and by he raised his head suddenly, and, looking towards London, exclaimed in a voice of suppressed, but intense passion: —

"The curse of hate, and the blight of death light upon the home to which I go!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HURRIED MARRIAGE.

THE November daylight dawned late upon the wedding morning of Lady Blanche Vavasour, and it found the fashionable belle seated before her looking-glass, with her lady's maid only in the first preparations for the bridal toilet.

Lady Blanche had passed a weary and sleepless night. A prey to some secret wretchedness which banished slumber from her pillow, she had counted the slow hours, and listened with restless eagerness to the silvery chimes of the buhl clock, upon the chimney-piece opposite her bed.

The late daylight was welcome to her eyes, for it ended the misery of the tedious night; and it would have been difficult to believe that the lovely creature who sat before her mirror, her eyes brilliant with the light of triumph, and her cheeks tinted with the fresh and delicate hues of a newly gathered blush-rose, had passed a long night in the agonizing torments of a guilty conscience.

While her lady's-maid was occupied in arranging her mistress's glittering plaits of golden hair, Lady Blanche Vavasour sat with her eyes fixed on a tiny jewelled watch, which hung on an ormolu stand on her dressing-table.

"Nine o'clock," she murmured, "only nine. Two hours yet before the time appointed for the marriage ceremony! How slowly the hands move! Two hours! What may not happen in two hours?"

Louison Mardel, the French lady's-maid, watched her mistress's face in the glass; but she could see nothing in its expression but the excitement natural to the occasion.

"How slow you are, Louison!" exclaimed Lady Blanche, impatiently; "you were never so long about my hair before."

"But you will pardon my slowness on such an occasion as this, miladi," answered the French woman. "I wish madame to look indeed a duchess."

A radiant smile of mingled pride and triumph illuminated the face of Lady Blanche as the maid pronounced these words.

"A duchess!" she repeated. "Yes, in two hours I shall be a duchess."

Louison Mardel coiled the superb plaits of hair in a knot at the back of Lady Blanche's head. This knot was supported by a comb of oriental pearls, one of the gifts of the Duke of Arlington. The alabaster forehead of the bride was encircled by a coronet-shaped wreath of orange blossoms, the buds of which were also of large pearls, while the flowers were sprinkled with diamonds, which represented dew-drops.

The bridal dress was of white moire antique, completely covered by an overskirt of the most valuable point lace. This dress had cost a small for-

tune; but Lord Templeton's creditors were ready to oblige him, in order to secure the patronage of the future Duchess of Arlington, who was sure to take her place as one of the leaders of fashion.

The toilet was completed as the clock struck ten.

"Now, miladi," said the French woman, "you will take some breakfast, I hope; for it would not do for you to faint away during the marriage ceremony."

"Yes, Louison," answered Lady Blanche; "I shall breakfast with papa this morning, as it it is the last which I shall spend at home."

She descended to the morning-room in which her father was seated. Lord Templeton's attack of gout had passed away, and for a time he was comparatively free from the excruciating torture.

"My old enemy has had the politeness to desert me on this important occasion, my dear Blanche," said the doting father, as his daughter entered the room in her bridal dress; "and I shall be able to give my child away to the man of her choice, and of mine, too, for the matter of that, for a more noble fellow than the Duke of Arlington never existed. My dearest girl, how lovely you look this morning!"

Lady Blanche Vavasour bent over her father's chair and embraced him tenderly.

"What shall I do without you, Blanche," said the earl, taking both his daughter's hands in his own and gazing with proud affection at her beautiful face. "What shall I do when I lose you, dearest? I think that when we are separated I shall have only one comfort left."

"And what will that be, dearest father?"

"Your picture, my darling; the portrait that was painted by that promising young artist who gave you lessons in painting. Let me see, Monkton, I think he was called. Why, how you shiver, Blanche!" exclaimed the earl, suddenly.

"The morning is cold, papa," answered Lady Blanche, carelessly; "and a wedding dress is not the warmest costume in the world for a November day."

At this moment a loud knocking and ringing sounded at the hall door. Lady Blanche hurried to the window.

"It is the duke's carriage!" she exclaimed. "What can have brought him here? We were to have met at the church."

The color faded from her cheeks, leaving her deadly pale.

She remained near the window, as if transfixed to the spot upon which she stood.

"It is his step," she murmured, as a footfall sounded upon the stair.

The Duke of Arlington entered the room. He was paler than his intended bride; his lips were set with the rigidity of determination, and a terrible light shone in his eyes.

"Lord Templeton," he said, "I know that you will pardon this intrusion. I come to ask you a favor."

"A favor!"

"Yes. The marriage was arranged to be solemnized at eleven o'clock."

"It was."

"Suffer me to anticipate the hour. It is now ten minutes past ten. Take Lady Blanche with you in my carriage; drive without a moment's delay to St. George's church; I will follow you in a cab, and the wedding can take place at half-past ten."

"But why thould we make this change in our arrangements?" asked Lord Templeton. "All was settled for eleven o'clock. The carriages were to be at the church at that hour, and our friends assembled to witness the ceremony."

"We need no friends to assist at our union," answered the duke, hastily. "There is not a moment to be lost. I tell you, my dear sir, I have a most powerful motive for making this request."

"And I will not grant it until I know that motive," replied the earl, with an accent of determination.

"As you will, my Lord," said Gerald Mortimer. "I wished to spare yourself, and the woman I love, all unnecessary pain; but since you compel me to speak, I will speak plainly. I told you a few days since that Lady Blanche has

enemies, — secret enemies, who are unscrupulous as to the means by which they assail her.".

Blanche Vavasour laughed a silvery laugh as the duke said this.

"Surely, Gerald," she said, carelessly, "you have never been so foolish as to listen to those horrible people again. I cannot forget how you frightened me one morning, about a month ago, by saying the most ridiculous and extraordinary things."

The duke looked scrutinizingly at his promised bride. Innocence and candor seemed to beam like the light of morning from her beautiful smile.

"It is no matter for jesting, Blanche," he said, gravely. "Whoever these enemies are, and whatever motive they may have, they are relentless, subtle, and implacable. You say I should not have listened. Did you know all, you would wonder that I could listen without believing. You would wonder that, after what I heard last night, I am here to-day to lead you to the altar."

"What, then, did they dare to say?" exclaimed the earl, rising from his chair, as if ready to denounce and defy the hidden enemies of his beloved daughter. "What did these wretches dare to say against my innocent child?"

"They said that which I will not repeat," answered Gerald Mortimer. "I will not pollute the ears of the woman I love, upon this day above all other days, by repeating the infamous words which I heard last night."

"Last night!" exclaimed Lady Blanche.

"Yes, last night, after I left this house," repeated the duke. "But there is no time to be lost. It wants only ten minutes to the half hour. My reason for anticipating the appointed time is this: There is little doubt that these people — these secret enemies of Lady Blanche — will try to be present at the ceremony; nay, perhaps, will even be more daring, and attempt some indirect insult towards the bride as she enters or leaves the church. I would at least prevent this."

"And it shall be prevented," cried Lord Templeton, energetically. "You are a noble fellow, Gerald, and Heaven grant you may be rewarded for your goodness! Come, Blanche. These people shall not enjoy the infamous triumph of making you unhappy upon your wedding-day. I will take your carriage, Gerald, and you can follow immediately. We shall reach the church in five minutes."

"You will find all ready," said Gerald Mortimer, "I have seen and spoken to the clergyman, and all is arranged."

At five and twenty minutes before eleven the earl and his daughter ascended the steps of St. George's Church. The duke had taken a Hansom cab and had arrived before them. The clergyman was waiting with his surplice on to perform the ceremony. The earl, the clerk, and the pew-opener were the only witnesses of this strange wedding. The day was dark and gloomy, and there seemed something ominous of evil to come in this hurried ceremony. The bride's magnificent costume seemed out of place in the almost empty church.

It wanted five minutes to eleven when the service was completed, and the duke gave his arm to the bride to conduct her to the carriage. As they left the church, the equipages of the guests who were to have assisted at the wedding began to arrive, and elegantly dressed women and aristocratic-looking men alighted before the steps of the holy edifice.

It was Lord Templeton's task to explain to these guests that there had been a mistake in the announcement of the hour for the ceremony. Among these guests was Percival Holmwood, the disappointed admirer of the bride.

As the duke and duchess descended the steps, the young millionnaire met them.

He bowed low as he approached the bride, and stood aside with his hat in his hand while she passed him.

"Let me be the first to offer my congratulations to the Duchess of Arlington," he said, courteously.

"And let me be the second," said the voice of one of the persons in the front row of the crowd which had already assembled about the steps of the church.

The person who spoke was a woman dressed in the deepest mourning that can be worn in memory of a very near relation. The bride turned at the sound

of this voice, and looked scrutinizingly at the person who had spoken, but the woman's face was completely concealed by a double veil of black crape.

The guests who had intended to assist at the wedding re-entered their carriages, and followed the equipage of the bride and bridegroom to Lord Templeton's mansion in Piccadilly.

A most splendid wedding-breakfast awaited them in the large dining-room; but the party was a small one, and the long table looked dreary in its splendor under the cold light of the November day. At about three o'clock in the afternoon the duchess ascended to her own apartments to change her brilliant bridal costume for the dress in which she was to start for the Continent, where the newly-married pair were to spend the honeymoon.

As the bride crossed the hall on her way to the grand staircase, she met Philip Howland, who had assisted the other footmen in waiting upon the guests at the wedding-breakfast. She lingered for a moment, under pretence of gathering a flower from an exotic-plant which bloomed in a superb China vase, at the bottom of the staircase, and addressed this man.

"You told me last night that you had a letter for me," she said, in a low voice.

"Yes, my Lady. I beg pardon, I should have said your Grace," answered the man, respectfully.

"Why, then, did you not bring it to me last night, when our visitors had left?"

"Because I had lost it, your Grace."

"Lost it!" exclaimed Blanche. "But where and how?"

"In my own room, last night. I fainted away,—from a fall, I believe,—and when I revived I discovered that the letter had been stolen from me."

"By whom?" asked the duchess, eagerly.

"I suspect one of my fellow-servants; but I am not certain that it was he who stole it."

"Did the letter reveal anything?"

"Very little."

"Philip Howland," said the duchess, fixing her large blue eyes upon the man, "*if you wish to* be rich, serve me, and serve me well; but beware how you betray me. You should know me well enough to remember that I do not fail to revenge myself upon those who injure me."

"I do remember everything, your Grace."

"And you are resolved to serve me?"

"I am."

"You will do wisely. Your wages in my service from this day will be at the rate of three hundred a year. Footmen are not generally paid so liberally; and I will give you a thousand pounds for each of the missing letters."

"Your Grace is very generous."

The footman bowed. The duchess gathered a few blossoms from the exotic, and ascended the staircase.

Short as the interview had been, it had not been unobserved. Percival Holmwood had stood in the shadowy recess of the doorway leading to the dining-room, watching the duchess and her servant.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MARBLE BUST.

Amongst the large, old-fashioned houses which still stand in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, and which bear upon them the stamp of a bygone century, there is one darker, smaller, older, and more dilapidated than the rest, which stands at a corner close to the river Thames, which flows underneath the windows at the back of the house. The principal buildings in Cheyne Walk face the river; but this house, which, as we have said, stands at a corner, turns its back to the flowing tide.

The strange woman who had advanced from the crowd to offer her congratulations to the Duchess of Arlington, waited upon the steps of St. George's Church until the last carriage had driven away and the crowd of foot passengers had entirely dispersed. She then walked into Hanover Square, and from thence to Regent Street, where she called a cab. She directed the cabman to drive to Cheyne Walk, and then

seating herself far back in the vehicle, out of sight of the passers-by, she lifted the thick black veil which had covered her face.

This woman was Isadora Monkton.

When the cab reached Cheyne Walk, Isadora Monkton directed the man to stop; alighted, paid, and dismissed him.

She waited until the vehicle was out of sight before she stirred, and then walked slowly towards the water-side.

"We cannot be too cautious," she murmured, as she looked after the receding vehicle.

She had lowered her veil before alighting from the cab, and her features were entirely concealed by the thick folds of crape.

Isadora Monkton stopped at the door of the corner house by the water, — the house which we have described. This dreary dwelling had few of the signs of habitation. The windows were encrusted with dirt; the shutters in front of the house were half closed; the door-step looked as if it had not been cleaned within the last twelve months.

Isadora Monkton took a key from her pocket, and, inserting it in the keyhole of the heavy oaken door, let herself into the house.

She did not enter either of the rooms in the front of the house, but walked straight to a large apartment situated at the back, and overlooking the water, which, at high tide, flowed almost on a level with the sills of the two large windows. As she approached the door of this room, she stopped for a moment and listened.

The sound of a chisel striking upon marble broke the silence of the desolate house.

A strange smile illumined the face of Isadora Monkton as she recognized this sound.

"Always faithful!" she exclaimed; "always constant! Never weary of his work! He is indeed a friend, — a friend to the living and a friend to the dead! Heaven help those to whom he is an enemy!"

She turned the handle of the door softly, almost noiselessly, and entered the room.

It was a large apartment, occupying the entire back of the house, and lighted by two bare, curtainless windows, and without any furniture but a couple of cane chairs, and a rough deal table, which was strewn with the implements of a sculptor's art.

At one end of the room stood an easel supporting a portrait, — a portrait which seemed life-like in the perfection of its painting.

This was the portrait of Hubert Monkton, painted by himself a year before his death.

The picture was life-size, and it represented the young artist seated before his easel with palette and pencils in his hand.

The painted eyes seemed to follow those who looked upon them, returning the gaze with the answering glance of life itself. The painted lips were half parted as if about to speak.

It was difficult to believe that this pictured face was the face of the dead.

By the side of this easel, placed a little in advance of it, and only separated from it by the space of two or three feet, was a rough pedestal supporting an unfinished marble bust.

This bust was a reproduction of the portrait. This bust was also an exact representation of the face and head of Hubert Monkton. Allowing for the difference between the cold hues and the rigid lines of the marble, and the brilliant coloring and soft shadows of the picture, the bust was as good a likeness as the portrait.

But it was as yet unfinished. The face already stood out in bold relief, but the head and throat were in the rough state.

Sebastian Contes, the Spanish sculptor, was at work at this bust when Isadora entered the room, — so intently at work that he heard neither the opening of the door nor her approaching footsteps.

She laid her small black-gloved hand upon his shoulder.

"You work well, Sebastian!" she said.

The young Spaniard turned around, and his face lighted up as he looked at Isadora Monkton.

"What would I not do for you?" he exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"And for HIM!" answered Isadora, gravely.

"Yes; for him too! — my friend! — my brother artist!" said the Spaniard. "The work progresses, does it not?"

"Nobly, Sebastian!"

"But tell me your news! The marriage! — did it take place?"

"It did!"

"Bah!" muttered the Spaniard between his teeth; "the duke must be bewitched!"

"He is bewitched by a beautiful face, as *he* was!" answered Isadora Monkton, pointing to the portrait of her Cousin Hubert.

There was a suppressed bitterness in her tone, and a strange light in her eyes as she said this.

"Then Lady Blanche is no longer simple Blanche Vavasour, but the Duchess of Arlington, the wife of one of the proudest and wealthiest noblemen in England!"

"So much the better," said Isadora.

"Why?" asked Sebastian Contes.

"The higher the elevation the more terrible the fall;" answered the young girl, with a sinister significance.

The Spaniard did not reply to this strange speech. He took up his chisel and resumed his work.

He only stopped when the early winter twilight stole over the breast of the river, and gathered in dark shadow before the windows of his studio. During the four long hours that he had waited, Isadora Monkton had remained seated near one of the windows, neither reading nor working; but silently and patiently watching the sculptor's labors.

It seemed as if life and death hung upon the progress of this marble bust of Hubert Monkton.

Isadora watched the gathering shadows with an impatient frown, which seemed to darken with the darkening of the winter's sky.

As the mists obscured the river, and the daylight slowly faded, she spoke for the first time, after the long silence which had only been broken by the monotonous sound of the sculptor's chisel, and the plashing and gurgling of the river against the brickwork below the windows. At this dismal season of *the year, there was* very little traffic upon the Thames at this distance from London.

"Not another stroke, Sebastian," said Isadora; "the light is nearly gone. Put away your work." The Spaniard obeyed without one word of remonstrance. He seemed entirely beneath the dominion of the young girl's powerful will.

There are some minds formed to achieve a mastery over others. There are some natures which seem created to rule; and the nature of Isadora Monkton had been fashioned in this queenly mould.

"You must be faint and hungry, Sebastian," she said, kindly. "I will go and prepare our dinner."

The sculptor threw a covering of green baize over the portrait, and a similar covering upon the bust, and then carefully closed and fastened the window-shutters; this done, he left the room, locking the door behind him, and placing the key in his pocket.

A fire and lighted candles were burning in one of the front rooms, the shutters of which were also closed and barred.

Isadora Monkton was busy in the apartment opposite to this, which served as a kitchen; for the large room at the back of the house was the real kitchen, but had been chosen as a studio by Sebastian Contes.

Isadora entered the room presently, carrying with her a tray, and followed by an old woman, who was the only servant kept by the young girl, and who laid the table for the simple dinner, which consisted only of a small piece of roast meat, a winter salad, and a bottle of light French wine.

Neither Isadora Monkton, nor Sebastian Contes, spoke much during the meal. Both seemed absorbed in their own thoughts; yet a silent sympathy evidently existed between them.

After the dinner-table had been cleared by the old woman, they still sat in silence on opposite sides of the fireplace, both looking thoughtfully into the blaze as if they saw there the memories of the past, or the dreams of the future.

They were aroused by a cautious knock at the front door of the house.

It was but one single knock, and yet there was something in its low and cautious sound that seemed like a signal.

Sebastian Contes started from his seat.

"I will open the door myself," he said.

"But remember! you admit no one except —"

"Except our partner in the work," interrupted the Spaniard. "Trust me, Isadora!"

He left the room and returned in a few minutes, bringing with him the dissipated-looking and shabbily dressed young man, who had watched the shadows upon the window-blind of Lord Templeton's mansion on the night of the 13th of October!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE UNWELCOME ANNOUNCEMENT.

Upon the day succeeding that on which the marriage of the duke and Lady Blanche had taken place, Luigi Malatesta was alone in his comfortable apartment at Arlington Woods.

He had devoted the morning to study, — study of the closest and most exhausting nature; and had thrown himself, half dead with mental fatigue, upon a luxurious sofa, which occupied one side of his room.

By the powerful effort of a master-mind, he had returned to the pursuits which the fatal influence of mad infatuation had for a time rendered intolerable to him. He had obeyed the solemn mandate of the Superior of the Jesuits, and he had once more devoted himself to the service of that powerful but dangerous sect.

His mind was once more filled with deeply designed plans and insidious schemes for the benefit of the Jesuit community, of which he hoped ere long to be the chief; but he had not forgotten. He had not forgotten! The image of Aurora, the foundling, the strolling player, still haunted him by day and night. It was in vain that he endeavored to banish the radiant vision. The face which had bewitched him seemed to have become a part of his very eyesight.

The Florentine had endured a bitter disappointment; but he had recognized in it the hand of a merciful Providence, and he had bowed to the cruel stroke.

On going, on the morning after the meeting in that lane, to the little village in which Aurora and her protector had taken up their abode, Luigi Malatesta had found that the birds were flown!

The landlady of the little cottage in which the Cheap Jack and his adopted daughter had lived, could tell him nothing but that they had started at daybreak; Mr. Primmins driving his van, and Aurora and the dog seated in the interior of the lumbering but comfortable vehicle.

The woman did not know which road the van had taken. She lived in a back lane, and had not seen which way Mr. Primmins drove on reaching the high road.

For a few moments Luigi Malatesta was almost mad with despair; but presently, recovering his better senses, he murmured in a broken voice: —

"The fiend has not triumphed, then! The Society of the Jesuits is stronger than the snares of the devil."

A dark and gloomy expression overshadowed the face of the Florentine, on this November day, as he rested after his morning labor. His mouth was set with the rigidity of iron; his dark eyebrows contracted over his thoughtful eyes. It was evident that he was thinking deeply.

"There may yet be time to prevent this accursed marriage," he muttered, thinking aloud; "it is not appointed to take place till the spring. Much can be done in the interval; for with time and opportunity all things are possible to the disciples of Ignatius Loyola. The bridegroom may be made to detest the promised bride; the bride to loathe the bridegroom! All things are possible to the wise and the patient. Thank Heaven, there is time!"

A rapid footstep in the corr[illegible] without aroused the Florentine from his reverie.

"It is Theobald's step!" he ex-

claimed. "What can he want with me? It is not his habit to disturb me when I am studying in this room."

The young man dashed into the apartment, with his hat in his hand, and with the excited manner of a person who has just received a great surprise.

"Such news, my dear Malatesta!" he said. "You will forgive me for bursting in upon you when you hear it. I have just come in from a ride, and found a letter waiting for me from my Uncle Gerald. What do you think has happened to him?"

"Happened to him!" exclaimed Luigi, turning ghastly pale, and clutching with a convulsive grasp at his pupil's shoulder. "What should have happened to him? He is not dead?"

"Dead!" cried Theobald Mortimer. "Do you think I should be thus lighthearted if my dear uncle were dead? No. The news is of a very different nature. I came to tell you that the Duke of Arlington was married yesterday to Lady Blanche Vavasour, and that he is going to bring her here after the honeymoon."

A black and terrible cloud spread itself over the face of the Jesuit.

"I am glad to hear that," he said, with an unnatural calmness. "Let her come. She will be welcome, — very welcome to me, above all others."

CHAPTER XXII.

A CHANGE OF SCENE.

The Duke and Duchess of Arlington spent the winter in that queen-city of fair Italy, — Florence the beautiful, — surrounded by the best and most aristocratic society to be met with in any part of the Continent.

Four months had passed since that bleak and foggy November day which witnessed the marriage of Lady Blanche Vavasour and Gerald Mortimer, — four months of unalloyed happiness to the devoted bridegroom, who beheld in the wife of his choice all that he considered beautiful in woman.

The duchess appeared to adore her noble husband. She was never weary of his society. The homage of strangers seemed utterly indifferent to her; and the frivolities of other women of fashion were abjured by the beautiful Blanche Mortimer.

The duke was thoroughly happy.

"Ah, Blanche!" he exclaimed sometimes, with an outburst of loving enthusiasm; "I wish that the vile wretches who endeavored to separate us could behold our happiness. They would see then the utter folly, as well as the black infamy, of their plots and artifices."

On one occasion, when the Duke of Arlington alluded to this subject, he was seated with his bride in the window of her luxurious boudoir at Florence, overlooking the moonlit waters of the Arno and the silvery shadows on the hills beyond.

Blanche was seated with her head resting on her husband's shoulder, and the rippling masses of her golden hair streaming over his breast. The lamp upon the marble chimney-piece burned dimly, and the bright flood of moonlight filled the apartment with its holy radiance.

"Tell me," murmured Blanche, lifting her large blue eyes to the face of the duke, — "tell me, my ever dearest, what did these people — these mysterious enemies — say of me?"

"No, no, my darling!" answered the duke; "I cannot tell you. I would not for worlds sully your pure spirit with their infamous words."

There was a pause for some moments before the conversation was again resumed.

"But, dearest," said Blanche, after this brief silence, "you once told me something of their cruel aspersions. You told me that they accused me of some horrible crime."

"They did," exclaimed Gerald Mortimer, his indignation becoming stronger than his prudence. "They accused you of the foulest, most terrible of crimes."

"And that is —"

"Murder!"

To the surprise of the duke, Blanche uttered no exclamation of horror. She remained perfectly quiet; but he could feel the rapid beating of her heart

against the arm with which he had tenderly encircled her waist.

"It is too horrible, my Blanche,—is it not?" he said.

"Yes," she answered; "it is almost too horrible for indignation. They accuse me—a girl of eighteen years of age—of murder! No, Gerald, it is not horrible, it is simply ridiculous. And pray whom do these wise individuals name as the victim of my crime?"

"A man whom I remember seeing at your father's house."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, I passed him one morning in the hall, and, being struck by his distinguished appearance, I asked who he was."

"And they told you—"

"That he was an artist who gave you lessons in painting. His name was Hubert Monkton."

Again the duke felt the quickened beating of the heart against his arm.

"Hubert Monkton!" exclaimed Blanche, laughing; "that is indeed too absurd. Hubert Monkton, a poor artist, who received four or five guineas for giving me lessons in painting. And may I ask what motive my traducers assign for my selection of this man as the victim of my murderous caprice?"

"I cannot tell you, Blanche."

"But I insist upon knowing."

"They said that he was your lover."

"Indeed! And what more?"

"They bade me recall to your memory the night of the 13th of October; and they told me to remind you of the missing letters written by you to Hubert Monkton."

The duchess uttered no word of reply. Her head still rested on the duke's shoulder, but he felt that her form grew heavier in his arms.

He started suddenly to his feet, and as he did so his wife's head fell back upon the cushions of the sofa.

Gerald Mortimer snatched the lamp from the chimney-piece, and held it over the prostrate form. He saw that she had fainted.

"Merciful Heaven!" he exclaimed, as he looked at her colorless face; "surely she cannot be guilty!"

He took some powerful perfume from a crystal bottle on the table, and sprinkled the fragrant essence upon her forehead.

"No," he murmured; "innocence is written on this alabaster brow. Poor girl! it is not strange that she should faint away on finding herself the victim of such infamous slander."

The duchess quickly recovered from her swoon, and, lifting her snowy eyelids, looked tenderly at her devoted husband.

"Have I fainted away?" she said. "How foolish of me! But you can scarcely wonder, Gerald, that I was overcome by what you told me."

. . . . . .

Early in March the duke and duchess left Florence for Paris, where his Grace had engaged a suite of elegant apartments in one of the largest of the newly built mansions in the Champs Elysées, one of the most fashionable quarters of Paris.

The newly married pair reached the brilliant capital of France a few days before the commencement of the Carnival, which, as our readers know, is a festival held before the beginning of Lent, and the name of which, "*Carne vale*," signifies a farewell to flesh.

Blanche had often visited Paris with her doating and indulgent father; but she was delighted to return to it in her new and far-loftier position as Duchess of Arlington.

Immediately upon the duke's arrival in Paris, he wrote to his nephew, Theobald Mortimer, requesting him to come over with his tutor, Signor Malatesta, to spend the Carnival time in the gayest city of the world.

"The poor lad must be dull at Arlington Woods," said Gerald Mortimer when he informed his wife of his intention; "and it is high time that he saw a little more of the world. A few weeks in Paris will be highly beneficial to him; and Malatesta will take care that he gets into no mischief."

The duke wrote very kindly to his nephew; and in the unselfishness of a noble and generous heart, did not even forget those who were to be left behind.

"You must tell my pretty Adela not to grieve in your absence, Theo," he wrote. "Your separation will not be

a long one, and I will take care that you are constant to your future wife. Tell my dear Augusta that we shall all come to Arlington Woods in April; but she must still remain mistress of the old house, as the duchess has no wish to undertake responsibilities for which she feels she is unfitted.

Luigi Malatesta's sallow face flushed with a dark crimson, when Theobald read this letter to him. To be near the Duke of Arlington was his strongest wish. It was necessary to the furtherance of his deep-laid designs, and it seemed as if accident had favored him.

"The cause of the disciples of Loyola flourishes, in spite of the enmity of the heretic," he murmured, as he received the duke's invitation.

"You will go, will you not, Signor Malatesta?" asked Theobald.

"Willingly, my dear boy. But tell me if I have rightly understood that letter. We are to start for Paris immediately?"

"Without an hour's unnecessary delay."

"And we are to remain with the duke and duchess until they leave France, and return with them to Arlington Woods?"

"Precisely! So go and see to your portmanteaus being packed, my dear signor. My man can assist you, before he looks to mine."

This conversation took place in the cheerful breakfast-room, in which the little family circle was assembled.

Adela Mortimer sighed as she watched her cousin's boyish enthusiasm.

"You are very impatient to leave us, Theo," she said, reproachfully.

"Impatient to leave you! No, dearest Adela," replied the young man; "only impatient to behold Paris, the wonder of the world, the capital of Fairyland. You can scarcely be surprised that I am delighted at my dear uncle's invitation."

Luigi Malatesta watched his pupil with a sardonic smile.

This innocent and boyish gayety of heart appeared ridiculous in the eyes of the wily Italian.

"You will forget your poor cousin in Paris," murmured Adela, in an undertone to Theobald, who was standing by her side in the large bow-window.

"Forget you, Adela? No, no, indeed," answered the young man, with enthusiasm. "I might forget my cousin, but not my plighted wife."

The young girl's eyelids fell over her eyes, and a rosy flush overspread her smiling face. Those few enthusiastic words had set her mind at rest. Her love for her betrothed husband was as innocent as the affection of a child, and she had no thought of deceit or hypocrisy. She was too truthful to believe in the existence of falsehood.

The Florentine watched the cousins with a smile.

"The love is unequal," he said to himself; "already I see the cloven foot of the fiend beneath the snowy robe of the angel. On one side devotion, on the other side indifference. What can result but misery? No, Adela Mortimer, you need have no fear of being oppressed by the weight of splendor. You will never be Duchess of Arlington."

. . . . . .

On the day after Theobald's receipt of his uncle's letter, the Florentine and his pupil arrived in Paris and drove straight to the Champs Elysées.

On their way from the railway station to their ultimate destination, the Jesuit and Theobald talked of the lady whom they were about to meet.

"She is beautiful as an angel, according to my Uncle Gerald's account," the young man said, laughing; "but as love is generally supposed to be blind, he may not be the best judge of the matter. However, it is useless to puzzle our brains with idle conjectures about the young duchess. We shall soon see for ourselves."

It was past six o'clock when the hack carriage in which the two men were seated arrived at the house in which the duke's suite of apartments was situated, and the spring twilight was already closing in.

The first floor of the mansion was occupied by the duke and duchess. The wide marble staircase and the lofty hall were worthy of an emperor's palace. The panels of the walls and

the domed ceiling of the hall were of white and gold.

The Florentine and his pupil ascended this superb staircase and entered an exquisitely appointed ante-chamber with crimson velvet and gold furniture and hangings. A couple of footmen were lounging upon a crimson velvet-cushioned bench in the large curtained window.

One of them rose as Theobald and Signor Malatesta entered.

"You will find the duchess in the inner drawing-room, gentlemen," said the servant, who was an Englishman. "Her Grace desired me to say that your arrival was anxiously expected."

The footman led the way through a corridor, hung like the ante-chamber, with draperies of crimson velvet.

He opened a panelled door of white and gold, which communicated with a suite of three drawing-rooms, separated from each other only by curtained archways.

The curtains were now thrown back, revealing the whole extent of the three apartments.

The footman retired, closing the door behind him.

"I don't like the face of the Italian," muttered this man, who was no other than Philip Howland. "He looks dangerous, but I'd have him beware how he interferes with my game."

In the second drawing-room Luigi Malatesta and his pupil paused for a moment to contemplate the picture presented to them in the inner chamber.

The duchess was seated in a half reclining attitude upon the magnificent crimson-velvet sofa, the glowing hues of which contrasted vividly with the alabaster of her exquisitely modelled shoulders and her delicately rounded arms. Her dress was perfect in its simple purity, unspoiled by any ornament. Her hair, which seemed darker in the shadows of the March twilight, was pushed back from her forehead in waving masses; a tiny spaniel, with a long nose and long silken ears, lay in the lady's lap, evidently very well satisfied with his lot in life.

Blanche Mortimer was not alone. An elegant Parisian fop lounged in an easy-chair near her sofa, uttering the vapid nothings which pass current in fashionable life. The duchess listened with a weary listlessness, which showed that she took little pleasure in his conversation.

Theobald Mortimer looked at his uncle's wife with the gaze of unconcealed admiration.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed, in a low voice, "she is indeed beautiful. I do not wonder at my uncle's infatuation."

Luigi Malatesta looked from the duchess to his pupil with a strange smile.

"So," he muttered between his teeth, "the spell works already. The subtle poison is rapid in its influence. Nothing could be better — nothing could be better! The disciples of Loyola triumph over the heretic."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WIFE'S REVELATION.

Let us retrace our steps, and once more return to that November night upon which Joseph Maldon left the house of Mr. Burton on his return to his own dreary habitation in Kale Court, Drury Lane.

Andrew Burton had become acquainted with the young chemist by means of one of those accidents upon which the most important events of life often depend.

Mr. Burton had lately returned to England with his wife and daughter at the time of which we write, and had taken the house near Walham Green, which was let for a comparatively low rent on account of the loneliness and dulness of its situation, and the neglected state in which it had remained for some years.

Andrew Burton described himself as a retired merchant, but he did not say in what he had dealt, or where his place of business had been situated. His disposition was reserved, and his manners were harsh and disagreeable; but, as he paid his way and interfered with nobody, people had no right to complain of his peculiarities. They contented

themselves, therefore, with saying that he was eccentric, and with speculating upon the history of his wife and daughter, who very rarely went beyond the court-yard and dreary garden of the old house.

Mr. Burton, however, was in the habit of leaving home very often, and remaining absent for a long time. Sometimes he went out very early in the morning, and did not return till long after dark.

This very much excited the curiosity of his few neighbors, as they wondered what motive could induce a man who had retired from business to be so much away from home. Whatever Mr. Burton's secret might be, he was far too wise a man to reveal it to his prying neighbors, or to any one else except at his own pleasure. He appeared to have neither friends nor acquaintances, and the postman was rarely seen to visit North Villa, as his neglected house was called. The only servant employed by the family was the old woman Barbara, who was quite as taciturn as her master.

Joseph Maldon had formed Mr. Burton's acquaintance, as we have said, in a very singular fashion. In the early dusk of an evening in September, the young man had walked from Fleet Street towards Drury Lane, on his return to the poor girl who, although not nineteen years of age, had been married to him for upwards of a twelvemonth.

Upon this particular evening he took a short cut through some narrow and obscure streets at the back of Drury Lane; and, in one of these humble and almost deserted thoroughfares, he was arrested by the sight of half a dozen vagabond lads crowded about a fallen man.

"What is the matter?" he asked, as he approached the group.

"The gentleman's in a fit, sir," answered one of the boys.

"Or tipsy," said another.

The young man pushed aside a couple of the lads, and bent over the prostrate man. He lay on his side, his head resting on his helpless arm, his hat off, and his face distinctly visible in the twilight.

"Fetch me a mug of water," said the chemist, in a tone of decision, which insured his being immediately obeyed.

One of the boys ran off, and quickly returned, bringing what was required of him.

The chemist dashed the water over the fallen man's face. He opened his eyes, and looked about him with a bewildered stare. Joseph Maldon assisted him to rise; but, when got upon his feet with an effort, he staggered, and would have fallen a second time, had not the young man supported him.

"It's rather a bad case, I'm afraid," muttered Joseph Maldon; "I'd better get him home, or to a hospital. Let's see if he's got a card about him."

He searched the stranger's pockets, although the half-conscious man made a faint resistance to his doing so.

In one of them he found a card-case, which he opened. The cards which it contained bore the name and address of "Mr. Burton, North Villa, Walham Green."

"All right," he murmured, under his breath, "I've got a patient at last. Call a cab," he said to one of the boys; "I must take this gentleman home."

Two or three of the lads rushed off, eager to distinguish themselves, and returned in about ten minutes with a four-wheel cab.

Joseph Maldon, assisted by the cabman, lifted the gentleman into the vehicle.

"Stop at the first chemist's shop," he said, "and get me some spirits of hartshorn. Then drive to North Villa, Walham Green."

The hartshorn considerably revived Mr. Burton, but he still seemed half stupefied, and did not appear to know where he was.

It was thus that Joseph Maldon first crossed the threshold of North Villa, carrying with him the master of the house, who had been stricken by a fit of epilepsy in the public street.

Andrew Burton was laid in his bed by the chemist and the old servant Barbara, and Joseph Maldon declared his intention of remaining all night to attend his patient.

"With the permission of the gentleman's wife, of course," he said to Bar-

bara. "Mrs. Burton might prefer to call in her family doctor."

"*She* prefer!" exclaimed the old woman, with a cackling laugh. "Bless her poor wandering wits, she hasn't got any voice in this house. And as to a family doctor, I never see any doctor here till to-night, when you brought in master."

"Then I can do no better than remain," said Joseph Maldon. "If you will bring me a pen and ink I'll write a prescription, which you can get made up immediately at the nearest chemist's."

When the old woman had left the room to comply with his request, Joseph Maldon took the candle in his hand and bent over his patient, who had fallen into a heavy but restless slumber. He looked scrutinizingly at the deep lines in the low forehead, the cadaverous complexion, the lantern jaws, and scanty iron-gray hair.

"A hard face," he muttered, "a cruel face. A bad face, perhaps."

Towards the morning Mr. Andrew Burton improved, and was well enough to converse with his self-elected medical attendant.

He frowned darkly when he heard where Joseph Maldon had found him, but recovered himself quickly, and thanked the young man for his care.

"Do you consider that I need further medical attendance?" he asked, looking furtively at the chemist.

"Most decidedly," answered the young man. "You will require great care for some little time, or you will be liable to a return of the attack."

"Do you live near here?"

"No," answered Joseph Maldon, "I live in London. I am a struggling man as yet, but I am not an inexperienced one, and I shall be happy to attend you, if, as I hear, you have no other medical man."

Mr. Burton seemed absorbed in thought, and allowed some little time to elapse before he answered Joseph Maldon.

"Yes," he replied at last, "you can attend me, as you say I require medical treatment."

It was thus that Joseph Maldon became acquainted with Mr. Burton and his daughter Lilian.

In entering this house the young man was guilty of two deliberate falsehoods.

He declared himself to be a surgeon, when he was only a chemist and druggist. And he called himself a single man, although he had left a wife in his humble home.

Lilian Burton and he were thrown much in each other's society. She was lonely and desolate in the neglected house, with a father who scarcely ever suffered her to approach him, and a mother whose intellect had long fled, leaving but its deserted temple behind.

Joseph Maldon was clever, accomplished, and gentlemanly, and master in all the arts which can fascinate a young and innocent girl. He was also designing and unscrupulous; and it was not long before he declared his affection for Lilian.

He knew that his wife lived, and yet he offered to marry her.

To the surprise of the chemist his offer was well received by Andrew Burton, who might naturally have been expected to seek a more ambitious alliance for his only child. This was a mystery to Joseph Maldon, who, mercenary himself, could not easily believe in the generosity of another; but it was not for him to complain at the chance which promised him the wealth he desired. He gladly seized upon the opportunity which destiny had flung across his pathway, and visited North Villa as the accepted lover of Lilian Burton. We last beheld him upon the foggy November night on which he returned from Walham Green to Drury Lane.

About a mile from North Villa he hailed a passing Hansom, and told the man to drive him to St. Clement's Church. Rapidly as the man drove, the hands of the church-clock pointed to ten minutes to six as Joseph Maldon alighted from the vehicle.

He plunged into Clement's Inn, and hurried from thence through Clare Market to Kale Court, which lay between the former place and Drury Lane.

The clocks struck six as he opened the door of his dingy little shop.

He strode rapidly through the shop, and opened the half glass door communicating with the parlor.

A pale, sickly-looking woman was

seated in a shabby arm-chair by the scrap of fire, with her head supported by pillows.

It was the same woman whom the Duke of Arlington had seen on the night of the 16th of October; but the month which had elapsed since that time had made a terrible change in her appearance.

She was wasted to a shadow. An unearthly lustre burned in her dilated eyes, her cheeks were hollow and sunken; her lips, of a faint bluish-white, almost resembled the hue of death.

A mysterious and nameless disease had wasted her frame, and racked her breast with tortures which were sometimes almost too terrible to bear. Her husband attended her,—watchfully, patiently, and tenderly, as the neighbors all said,—but still she did not recover.

She looked up as Joseph Maldon entered the room, and a vivid and feverish flush crimsoned her shrunken face.

"How long you have been, Joseph!" she said. "It is six o'clock, and you promised to be back at five. What has detained you so long?"

"My patients, Margaret," he answered, coldly; "remember I have other pursuits besides attending my sick wife."

"But you might spare a little more time to your *dying* wife, Joseph," she murmured, reproachfully.

"Dying!" exclaimed the young man. "Bah, Margaret, what childish notion is this you have got into your head?"

"A childish notion which will never leave me, Joseph," she answered, gravely, "until I am laid in my coffin."

"Pshaw! you are out of spirits, I suppose, from sitting too long alone. You should read, or do something to amuse yourself."

"I cannot read."

"Why not?"

"Because a dark vision rises between my eyes and the page at which I look."

"A vision! What vision, child?"

"The shadow of an open grave."

Joseph Maldon started from his chair, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"If you want to give me the horrors, Margaret," he said, angrily, "I shan't stay. "I've plenty of troubles wit listening to such nonsense as this."

He left the room and went int shop, where a gas-light was bur over the counter. He took down a tle from one of the shelves, and po two or three drops of its contents i wine-glass. He then returned to parlor, carrying the glass with him

"It is time for you to take your icine, Margaret," he said.

His wife shuddered as she answ him.

"I had rather not take any mo that medicine, Joseph," she said; only makes me worse."

"But it is for your benefit."

She shrugged her shoulders, wi desponding sigh.

"As you please," she answered. cannot refuse if you insist upon taking it, for, of course, you know is best for me. But I tell you, more, that the medicine you give tortures me. It seems to burn my heart with its fiery strength. I saying so only to-day."

Joseph Maldon started.

"You were saying so. To who

"To our next-door neighbor, Dawson."

"And what did she say?"

"That you are a very clever y man, and that whatever you give n no doubt for my good."

"Mrs. Dawson is a sensible wom said Joseph Maldon.

He took a medicine bottle fro little table near his wife's chair, poured some of the mixture whic contained into the same wine-glass which he had dropped the liquid the bottle in the shop.

He handed the glass to the inv but as she drank the medicine he tu away from her and took a book fro shelf against the wall.

"I shall go into the shop and stu he said.

"O Joseph!" murmured his wife, reproachfully, "you will su stay with me now you have come ho I won't utter a single word to dis you while you are studying."

"But your presence distracts n he answered, sternly, "and I shal

handier to any customers who may happen to come in."

He did not wait to hear any further remonstrances, but passed into the shop and shut the door behind him.

He seated himself at the back of the little counter, and opening a thick volume bent over the page.

But though his eyes were fixed upon the printed words before him, it was evident that he was not reading. A gloomy shadow darkened his face, and the restless twitching of his lip was more than usually visible.

He sat for two hours in the same attitude, without turning a leaf of his book, without ever raising his eyes from the pages before him.

At the end of that time he was suddenly aroused by the opening of the glass door, and the ring of a little bell, which in that neighborhood usually announced the entrance of a customer. Joseph Maldon looked up, and met the searching glance of Andrew Burton's ratlike eyes.

A vivid crimson flush dyed the young chemist's pale face as he recognized his visitor.

"You—you here, Mr. Burton!" he exclaimed, with visible confusion.

"Yes," answered the merchant, slowly. "I had my suspicions as to your private life, Mr. Joseph Maldon, and I took the first opportunity of making an investigation. I have made a few inquiries of some of your neighbors in this delightful locality, as I wished to learn something of the history of Miss Burton's suitor. I hear that you are living here with a woman. That woman is—"

"My sister, my orphan sister," answered Joseph Maldon, eagerly.

"No," cried a clear and ringing voice, which vibrated through the low-roofed shop, "she is your wife; your lawfully wedded wife."

The door between the parlor and the shop had been softly opened during the foregoing conversation, and as the two men turned round, surprised by the sound of that clear voice, they beheld the pale face, the bright, yet hollow, eyes of the invalid.

"Yes, Joseph Maldon, your unhappy wife," repeated the young woman. "I now know why you have been so often absent, why I have been so deserted. *I know now all!*"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MASKED WOMAN.

Luigi Malatesta and his pupil, Theobald Mortimer, were thrown much in the society of the Duchess of Arlington. They rode and drove with her in the delightful suburbs of Paris; they visited churches and picture-galleries, the Italian gazing with intense devotion upon the noble monuments of Catholic piety which adorn the capital of France. They accompanied the duke and duchess to balls and parties, operas and theatres, where, amongst all other beauties, the lovely Blanche Mortimer reigned pre-eminent. Silent and watchful amongst the gay and thoughtless, the ambitious Jesuit sat apart at these splendid assemblies, and gazed upon the busy figures in the crowd, penetrating the meaning of each glance, reading each unspoken thought which left its impress on the face. Unlike those pure and lowly members of his church, whose lives are passed in one holy round of pious deeds and merciful charity, Luigi Malatesta's dreams were of worldly glory, rather than of heavenly rewards; and, like many ambitious men, he cared little by what pathway he reached the goal to which his proud intellect urged him on. Before he had been a week in Paris, he had possessed himself of a secret which filled his mind with diabolical joy.

Theobald Mortimer had fallen madly in love with the Duchess of Arlington. The young man kept this fatal secret locked in his own breast. He knew not that it had been fathomed by a living creature. Honorable and truthful in every feeling, he was horrified at the thought of harboring one idea which could be treachery towards his generous kinsman; yet, in spite of every sentiment of affection and respect, he could not control his deep and enthusiastic admiration for the lovely being whom his uncle had won for his bride.

His cousin, Adela Mortimer, was forgotten. In vain he tried to remember the sacred tie which bound him to his young and innocent betrothed. The fatal spell of Blanche Mortimer's beauty had a deadly influence which he was powerless to withstand. In her presence he forgot all, save that she was near him. In her absence the sky seemed darkened; the earth changed from a paradise to a dreary desert of loneliness and desolation.

"My poor Adela!" he exclaimed sometimes, in the bitterness of self-reproach, "could you but know that I am false to you, what agony you would endure! what cruel tortures I should inflict upon your innocent heart!"

On a dark, rainy night, about a week after the arrival of Luigi Malatesta and Theobald Mortimer in Paris, the Florentine sat alone and absorbed in study in his comfortable apartment, which adjoined that of his pupil. The duke and duchess had gone to the Italian opera, accompanied by Theobald. Signor Malatesta had remained at home by his own especial desire. He sat over his books, with a pile of heavy volumes by his side, and a shaded lamp casting a subdued light upon the open pages before him. But ever and anon his eyes wandered from the printed lines and fixed themselves in a dreamy gaze upon the wall opposite him.

The image of the beautiful face of Aurora, the strolling actress, appeared to him in the solitude of his chamber. Once more he beheld her luminous hazel eyes, her pale face, her golden-tinted hair, her crimson parted lips, beneath which glimmered the twin rows of pearly teeth.

"Avaunt!" he cried, passionately, after abandoning himself for a while to the recollection of that lovely countenance; "avaunt, mocking shadow, evil spirit! leave me to my peace! Come not between me and my ambition! Come not between the worker and his work!"

He bent his head upon his clasped hands, and, after a few moments' silent reverie, he returned to his patient and wearisome studies.

But he was not allowed to remain long without interruption. He was disturbed by a low knock at the door, and, on going to open it, found himself face to face with one of the duchess's powdered footmen.

This man was the English servant, Philip Howland.

"What do you want?" asked Luigi Malatesta, sternly. "I gave orders that I was not to be interrupted by any one."

"I should not have ventured to disturb you, sir," answered the footman, respectfully, "but I was compelled to do so by a person who is waiting below, and who says he *must* see you upon most important business."

"Important business!" exclaimed the Florentine; "let him come to me, then."

"He refused to do that, sir," replied Philip Howland; "he requested you to see him in the entrance-hall at the foot of the principal staircase."

"So be it, then, since he is so very importunate," answered Luigi. "I know the way," he added, as Philip Howland was about to usher him towards the staircase; "you need not accompany me."

The footman drew back, and the Italian descended the stairs. He found a man waiting in the large and superbly decorated hall. The stranger wore a loose coat, which muffled his figure, and a hat slouched over his brow so as to conceal the upper part of his face. He stood in the shadow of a marble pillar which supported the principal doorway.

"May I ask your business with me?" said Luigi Malatesta, looking with a scrutinizing glance at the man.

"I have little to say to you, Signor Malatesta," answered the stranger; "my business is written here."

He handed the Italian a folded slip of paper. Luigi Malatesta approached one of the lamps which lighted the wide and lofty hall, and, after unfolding the paper, read the following words:—

"If Signor Luigi Malatesta would know the darker secrets in the life of Blanche Mortimer, Duchess of Arlington, let him come to the house to which the bearer of these lines will conduct him."

The Italian gazed in utter bewilderment at the mysterious missive. Then, after a few moments' deep thought, he

plunged his hand in the bosom of his waistcoat.

That hand encountered the hilt of a dagger, a small but deadly weapon, which the Florentine always wore concealed among the folds of his shirt.

"I will follow you," he said, suddenly turning to the stranger.

"You are not afraid?" asked the man.

"Afraid! No!" cried the Italian. "Fear and Luigi Malatesta are strangers."

He beckoned to the porter, who opened the massive hall door, and the two men went out into the darkness.

The night was dull and wet, and the Champs Elysées were deserted by foot passengers. The carriages of the rich rolled noiselessly along the smooth drive, but the poor were compelled to remain in their close chambers, high up amid the crowded garrets of Paris.

The stranger led the way to the end of the Champs Elysées, across the broad open Place de la Concorde, and over one of the bridges, to the narrow streets in the Faubourg St. Germains. In one of the narrowest and darkest of these streets he paused, and, for the first time since they had left the duke's house, addressed his companion: —

"It is here that we are to enter," he said. "Follow me."

He pushed open the door, and conducted the Florentine into a dark and dingy hall. They ascended a few stairs, and on the first landing they passed the tiny room occupied by the porter and his wife. The stranger nodded to the woman, who sat knitting by the light of an oil lamp, and led the way to the second landing-place.

Here he paused, and knocked softly at one of the doors opening upon the staircase.

A clear, yet low voice, murmured, "Come in."

"Enter," said the man, opening the door, and drawing aside for the Italian to pass him.

Luigi Malatesta entered the room. As he crossed the threshold of the apartment, the door closed behind him, and he found himself alone with a woman.

The apartment was large, plainly furnished, and dimly lighted by the red glare of a wood fire, which gave a ghostly and almost diabolical aspect to the scene which met the Italian's gaze.

Upon a sofa, opposite to the fireplace, sat a woman, dressed entirely in white, and wearing a mask upon her face.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Luigi.

"You will know presently," answered the masked woman, "if you will wait and be patient."

She pointed as she spoke to a chair by her side. The Italian bowed, and seated himself near her. He had spoken the truth when he declared that he was a stranger to fear.

"You are an inhabitant of the house of Gerald Mortimer, the Duke of Arlington?" the woman said, quietly.

"I am."

"Are you his friend?"

Luigi Malatesta did not answer, but a dark shadow overspread his countenance, lingering only for a moment before it passed away.

"I see that you are not," said the woman. "If you are his enemy, and the enemy of the woman whom he has newly wedded, I would speak to you. If you are not, the dark secrets of her life can have little interest for you."

"But they have interest to me," exclaimed the Florentine, falling on his knees at the feet of the masked woman. "Speak, speak, I implore you. If you know aught of the secrets of this enchantress, whose fatal face has bewitched the Duke of Arlington, speak to me; for I, above all others, would fathom the history of her life."

"And if she had been guilty of a crime," said the woman, in a low and solemn voice, "if she were proved to be guilty, and those who had discovered her infamy were about to punish her, would you interpose between her and the hand of the avenger?"

"No! cried Luigi Malatesta, "*I would not.*"

"So be it!" exclaimed the woman, in loud and measured accents. "Gentlemen of the AVENGING LEAGUE, you may enter."

As she finished speaking, the door

slowly opened, and two men entered the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE AVENGING LEAGUE.

THE two men, who entered the room as the masked woman pronounced these strange and solemn words, walked slowly and silently towards the centre of the apartment, and seated themselves in two empty chairs near the table.

These two men were both tall and slender; their figures resembled those of young men; but it was impossible to declare the age of either, for both of them wore masks.

"There are three of us here, you perceive," said the woman, turning to Luigi Malatesta, and addressing him in the same quiet and solemn voice; "three of us who are united by a vow of allegiance to one terrible purpose; three people who have sworn to punish a guilty woman."

"And that woman is the Duchess of Arlington?" asked the Florentine, eagerly.

"She is."

"And the crime of which she has been guilty is—"

"Murder," answered the masked woman, solemnly.

"Murder!" exclaimed the Jesuit, horror-stricken by the fearful revelation. "Oh Heaven! this is too terrible!"

"There are murders committed in the crowded city of London," said the masked woman, "of which the world never hears. A man leaves his home, happy, successful, trusting in the truth and honor of his fellow-creatures, fearless and heedless of danger, without one thought of wrong. But that man may, perhaps, possess secrets which endanger the safety of others. He may have engendered hatred in the vengeful breast of some hidden enemy. He leaves his home in the morning; at nightfall his friends watch for his return; they cannot dream of danger, for custom has made his absence a common thing, his coming home a regular event in the day's quiet monotony. Upon this night *he does not return.* They wait patiently, but they wait in vain. The long hours drag themselves slowly out; the day dawns, but still he does not return. Inquiries are made; a search is instituted. The missing man is traced to a certain street; perhaps he is seen to enter that street, walking with a light step, an unconcerned and careless manner. He is never seen to leave that street. Dead or alive, mortal eyes never look upon him again. A murder has been done; a body has been concealed; none know how or where. There may, however, be some who know the secrets of the missing man's doom, and who are able to point with an unerring finger at the only living creature who had reason to dread that man's life, to accomplish that man's death."

"Why do you tell me this?" asked Luigi Malatesta.

"Because I would have you understand the motive of the solemn league in which we three are bound and in which we would have you join us," answered the masked woman. "Upon the 13th of last October, Hubert Monkton,—an artist of considerable genius, but no very great reputation, left his home in accordance with a letter summoning him to a certain hotel in Blackfriars. He arrived at that hotel in safety; he was seen to leave the house, accompanied by a strange man. He was never seen again."

"But how, in the name of Heaven," exclaimed the Florentine, "would you connect this fact with Lady Blanche Vavasour? How should she be concerned in this business?"

Hubert Monkton was the lover of Lady Blanche Vavasour. He possessed thirteen love-letters, written to him by her,—love-letters which, had they fallen into the hands of the Duke of Arlington, would have broken off the aristocratic and wealthy marriage upon which the ambitious woman had set her heart. Hubert Monkton refused to restore those letters. He declared himself to be infamously used by the woman who had sworn to become his wife, and he declared that he would not part with the letters until he parted

with his life. Six hours after this he disappeared."

"And you believe that he was made away with?"

"I believe that he was murdered at the instigation of Lady Blanche Vavasour. Her hands may be unstained by blood, but her soul is deeply dyed in guilt. From evidence I have received, I know that a man stealthily entered her father's house on the 13th of October, between the hours of two and three in the morning. I know that Lady Blanche had an interview with that man in her own room, at that late hour; that she watched and waited for his coming, pacing up and down her room in the restlessness of guilt and agony. That man was the actual murderer, — the agent who committed a crime prompted and paid for by another. That other was Lady Blanche Vavasour."

An icy sweat had broken forth upon the brow of the Florentine. A sickly pallor had changed the natural hues of his face, as the masked woman had spoken these words.

It was some moments before he made any reply; and, when he did so, his voice was strange and husky.

"If this is so, why not openly denounce the duchess, and let justice do its work?" he asked.

"Because justice requires positive proof," answered the woman, "and as yet we have no positive proof."

"What would you do, then?" asked Luigi.

"We would make more discoveries than we already know," replied the mask. "If possible, we would obtain proof. We would unravel the tangled threads of this mystery, and unite them into a chain which should compass the destruction of the lovely Duchess of Arlington."

"And you have sent for me —" asked the Florentine.

"We have summoned you hither because we believe that you can aid us," interrupted the woman. "You live under the same roof that shelters the duchess; you have, therefore, a power which we do not possess. Speak, then, — will you aid us? We have sworn to help each other to attain one end. That end is vengeance. Will you take the oaths which we have taken? Will you bind yourself by the vows which unite us?"

"I will."

"We have called ourselves the Avenging League," returned the woman; "will you become a member of that league?"

"I will."

The woman pointed to a crucifix hanging upon the wall opposite.

"Swear by that sacred emblem," she said, solemnly; "swear to become the avenger of guilt,"

"I swear," answered the Florentine, in the same solemn tones.

During the whole of this conversation, neither of the two men sitting at the table had uttered a word; they now rose, and each in his turn extended his hand to Luigi Malatesta, and clasped the hand of the Florentine.

"We four are henceforward united by the solemn vow of vengeance," said the masked woman.

"You, Luigi Malatesta, neither know our names, nor who we are, nor whence we come. You have no need to know these things. Wherever you meet a stranger who says to you 'I am an avenger,' you will recognize one of the league to which you belong, — you will recognize a being who has taken justice out of the fettered hands of the law. And now, good-night!"

The mask pointed to the door, and Luigi Malatesta, after saluting her with a low bow, walked towards this door; but, at the threshold, he paused and looked round. The two men who had clasped his hand were still masked, still silent; but through the narrow holes in their black masks he could see the glitter of their eyes following him. The eyes of the first were black; the eyes of the second were a pale but luminous blue. As he passed one of these men he had observed a powerful odor, — the perfume of otto of roses.

Luigi Malatesta descended the staircase and passed out into the quiet street; narrow, dark, and crowded, shut out from the bright sky by the height of the dilapidated old houses, which seemed tottering forward in their neglected age.

The rain was still dropping, — dropping ceaselessly and slowly, with a weary monotony, which is painful to a mind ill at ease.

Luigi Malatesta felt as one who walks in a dream. The chamber which he had just left, the woman who had told him so much, but whose face he had never seen, — all wore the aspect of some vision of a fevered mind. He looked about him half wonderingly, as if doubtful whether he was indeed waking or sleeping; but he quickly recognized one of the streets of that great city, with whose every nook and corner he had once been familiar.

He made his way back to the quay, and across one of the bridges towards the Champs Elysées. He looked neither to the right nor the left. His eyes were fixed in the dreamy gaze of one who scarcely knows where he is, or whither he is going.

"A murderess!" he muttered, as he pondered over the interview which had just taken place. "A murderess! Can it be true? Come what may, I must discover that. If it be true, the rest is easy, and the fortune of the Duke of Arlington is mine. Mine!" repeated the ambitious man; "mine forever!"

The great clock of Notre Dame struck twelve, as the Florentine crossed the Place de la Concorde, and entered the broad avenue of the Champs Élysées.

The lamps of innumerable carriages shone through the darkness. The gay and pleasure-loving Parisians were returning from the operas and theatres or hurrying to seek new amusements in the mansions of the wealthy and fashionable.

Luigi Malatesta ascended the staircase, and entered the ante-chamber leading to the duke's apartment.

Philip Howland was lounging on one of the velvet-covered benches. He rose as the Florentine entered, and Luigi could see that the footman gazed upon him with a prolonged and penetrating glance.

"His Grace has returned, Signor Malatesta," said Philip Howland; "and Mr. Mortimer is with his uncle, in the duchess's boudoir."

"I will join them," returned the Italian. "Stay! let me see, you are the footman of her Grace, — are you not?"

"I am, Signor Malatesta," answered Philip Howland.

"Good! Be sure, then, that you do not mention my visit of to-night, nor my absence."

"I will keep your secret, signor," replied the servant, with peculiar significance.

Luigi Malatesta passed along the corridor, and entered the exquisitely appointed boudoir of the duchess.

The duke was seated in an easy-chair upon the velvet-pile hearth-rug. The duchess was standing beside the low wood fire, with her rounded elbow resting upon the marvellously chiselled marble mantel-piece, and her beautiful head supported by her jewelled hands. She wore a voluminous robe of white velvet, whose heavy folds swept the ground. This costly dress was fastened at the waist by a girdle of superb emeralds, and the short sleeves were looped up from the alabaster arms of the duchess by ornaments of the same stones. Her amber-tinted hair was encircled by a coronet of mingled emeralds and diamonds.

In this costume Blanche Mortimer looked wonderfully lovely. In one careless hand she held a fan of snowy plumes, studded here and there with fire-flies, formed of emeralds and diamonds. She was waving this fan slowly to and fro as the Florentine entered the room.

On a chair near that of the duke Theobald Mortimer was seated, gazing with silent admiration on the lovely woman before him.

The duchess was talking gayly of the evening's amusement.

"How hard these people work!" she said, laughing; "these unfortunate singers and musicians, who do their best to amuse us, and yet so often fail in being anything but tiresome. They are paid remarkably well, no doubt, but still their life must be a dreary one. Who would be an artist?"

"Ah! who indeed, your Grace," returned Luigi Malatesta, who stood lounging over the back of Theobald

Mortimer's chair, and looking at the beautiful face of the duchess; "who indeed would be an artist? To lead a life of toil; to endure poverty and disappointment; to die, perhaps, while yet in youth's fairest bloom; to die, it may be, unregretted."

"In what a melancholy tone you speak, Signor Malatesta!" exclaimed Blanche Mortimer. "One would suppose you were alluding to some particular circumstance in the life of these people."

"I am thinking of a young man whose story I heard a few days ago," answered Luigi Malatesta, gravely. "It was a melancholy story, and impressed me very painfully. The young man was a painter."

"A painter!" exclaimed the duke, looking suddenly at Luigi, with a searching and anxious gaze. "What was his name?"

"It would be almost useless to repeat it to your Grace," replied the Florentine, smiling; "you are not likely ever to have heard of the young man. He was still toiling slowly upward in the steep pathway of fame, when death put an end to his career."

"He is dead, then?" said the duke.

The duchess still waved her fan of snowy plumes and flashing jewels to and fro before her alabaster bosom; but her large blue eyes were strangely dilated, and fixed with a stony gaze upon the face of the Florentine.

"Yes, he is dead," answered Luigi Malatesta; "he died, suddenly and mysteriously, upon the night of the 13th of October."

The fan still waved to and fro, the blue eyes still gazed upon the quiet face of the Jesuit.

"And his name!" cried the duke, "his name!"

"Does your Grace really care to hear anything so insignificant as the name of an obscure artist?" asked Luigi Malatesta, with a sneer.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the nobleman, "I must and will hear it."

"His name was Hubert Monkton."

"I have heard that name before," said the duke, in a hoarse voice. "You say the young man's history was a melancholy one; what was that history?"

"No very uncommon one, your Grace," answered Luigi Malatesta. "The stories of undiscovered crime are very numerous."

"Undiscovered crime!" cried the duke.

"Yes; Hubert Monkton was murdered."

"Murdered!" exclaimed Gerald Mortimer, clenching his hand till the sharp nails cut into the flesh, "who dares to say that — who dares to say—"

"Did you know this man, your Grace?" asked the Florentine.

"Know him — no — who said that I —"

"Pray pardon me," interrupted the Italian; "I feared, from your agitation, that the young man might have been in some manner connected with your Grace. His story is, as I have said, a very common one. He was an artist, young, handsome, and, I am told, clever. In an evil hour he attracted the attention of a lady of rank and fashion, — a beauty, I believe, who was or pretended to be in love with him. The fair daughter of fashion fooled her besotted admirer with the hope that she would stoop to become his wife. She wrote him letters, in which she made this promise,— letters in which she fondly dwelt upon the avowal of her love; but the flame of affection died out before a more powerful fire. The star of love sank in the broad sunshine of ambition. The lady was wooed by one of the proudest nobles in the land. She hurried to her artist lover; she implored him to return those fatal letters; he refused; and, within half a dozen hours of this refusal, he was a dead man."

"It is false!" cried the duke, haughtily. "It is a vile scandal against an innocent woman."

"What!" exclaimed Luigi, "does your Grace know the lady?"

There was a pause of some moments. The duke was silent; the duchess still fanned herself, still leaned in a carelessly graceful attitude against the marble chimney-piece, but her eyes had never been withdrawn from the face of the Italian.

"You have not mentioned the name of the lady, Signor Malatesta," she said, after a brief silence, looking at the Jesuit with her sweetest smile.

"My informant did not tell me that, your Grace," replied Luigi; "the lady is in a very high position, if I understood the story right. It would be scarcely safe to whisper such an accusation against a rich and powerful woman. Those who wish to avenge the death of Hubert Monkton, the artist, must wait and watch for their opportunity."

The duchess smiled; her rosy lips parted, revealing the small pearly teeth, as she still gazed at the Florentine.

"They may have to wait long, Signor Malatesta," she said.

"If my informant was correct in his information, they can afford to do so," replied the Jesuit; "they are patient, and they are prepared for many disappointments before they succeed."

"Before they succeed in what?" asked the duchess.

"In obtaining full proof of this woman's guilt," answered Luigi Malatesta, "and in destroying the murderess of Hubert Monkton."

The duke was silent; he sat with his elbow resting upon the velvet-covered cushion of his easy-chair, his noble face shrouded by his hand.

Theobald Mortimer interrupted this strange conversation. "Why do you talk of such things before her Grace, Signor Malatesta?" he said. "Such subjects are not to be discussed in the presence of a lovely and innocent woman."

"I trust her Grace will pardon me," replied the Florentine. "I own that I was inconsiderate in talking of this business."

"Willingly, my dear signor," said Blanche Mortimer. "I am very much interested in this subject, as his Grace knows," she added, looking significantly at the duke. "I knew Hubert Monkton, — that is to say, I received a few lessons in painting from him, and there was that slight acquaintance between us which usually exists between a lady and her drawing-master. I have heard the circumstances of his disappearance before; but I do not believe that he is dead; and you may rely upon it, that the persons who told you this absurd story were the secret enemies of the lady whom they accused."

"Her Grace is right," said the duke; "and let me beg you, Signor Malatesta, never again to repeat this infamous slander. Indeed, I shall consider it a personal insult if you allude to it in my presence."

The Florentine bowed, and shortly afterwards retired with Theobald Mortimer, leaving the duke and duchess together.

An hour later, Luigi Malatesta sat writing by the brilliant light of his shaded lamp.

"She is guilty!" he exclaimed, pushing away his papers, as he concluded his work; "she is guilty! She is daring as a tigress, and she carries her secret with a high hand. But the masked woman has told the truth, and the soul of the beautiful duchess is stained with the foul crime of murder."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CARNIVAL BALL.

One of the chief festivities of the Carnival season in Paris is, as our readers are doubtless aware, the masked ball at the opera-house in the Rue Lepelletier, the scene of Orsini's attack upon the present Emperor of the French.

At that ball, high and low, rich and poor, guilty and innocent, mingle in the tumult of gayety and intoxication.

At that ball strange and terrible scenes have been enacted; murder has been plotted; duels have been planned amongst those giddy maskers, — duels which have afterwards been fought, in the cold gray light of early morning, far away in the pleasant wood, where the leaves were budding in the springtime of the year.

Mysteries of death and darkness have been hidden beneath the masks worn at that crowded assembly, and the gay dancers have little dreamed of the secrets of their partners; have never guessed the blood-stains on the

hands that met theirs, in the mad gallopade or whirling waltz.

It was arranged that the duke and duchess should go to this Carnival ball, accompanied by Theobald Mortimer.

The Florentine refused to accompany the party, in spite of his pupil's solicitations.

It was eleven o'clock when the duchess entered the doors of the opera-house, leaning upon the arm of her husband's nephew, Theobald Mortimer. The duke walked close behind, eager to watch over and protect the woman he loved, in the midst of this scene of folly and dissipation. Blanche Mortimer wore a long domino of rich black silk, and a velvet mask of the same sombre hue. She had selected this costume at the request of the duke, who did not wish her to be conspicuous amongst so strangely intermixed an assembly.

As she was leaving the house on her way to the carriage Luigi Malatesta stopped her.

"The hood of your Grace's domino is unfastened," he said, politely; "will you allow me to secure it? I am used to these Carnival disguises."

The duchess assented, and the Florentine fastened the hood. As he did so, he drew a tiny shred of scarlet ribbon from his waistcoat pocket, and attached it to the black ribbons which tied the hood. The duchess did not perceive this scrap of ribbon, but it was distinctly visible to any one who looked particularly at the fastenings of her domino.

The party entered the crowded lobbies leading to the enormous platform covering the pit, the orchestra, and the stage.

Three minutes after entering the opera-house the duke was separated from his wife and nephew.

The crowd flowed hither and thither; powerful as some torrent, it drove all before it. The duke scarcely knew how or where the separation took place, but he found himself far apart from his companions, and utterly ignorant as to which direction they had taken.

Theobald and the duchess had been driven back by the throng, and had retreated to the portico of the theatre. Here the crowd was still greater. The noisy maskers clustered around them, shouting and laughing. The duchess clung to her companion's arm, terrified by the noise and confusion.

"Let us go back and find the duke," she said; "he is waiting for us, no doubt, in one of the lobbies. We shall never be able to discover him upon the stage."

Theobald obeyed, and conducted his lovely charge back to the entrance of the opera-house. Again they found themselves buried in the ever-changing, ever-restless crowd.

As the duchess gazed about her, bewildered by the confusion, she suddenly felt her left hand pressed in the strong hand of a man.

"I will take you to the duke, duchess," a voice whispered in her ear. "Loose your companion's arm, and come with me."

She obeyed almost involuntarily, scarcely knowing what she did; and, before she could repent of her imprudence, she found herself drawn through the crowd by the strong grasp of the stranger's hand, and entirely separated from Theobald Mortimer.

The stranger led her on, still piercing the crowd, through which he pushed his way, clearing a passage for the duchess as he went.

They crossed the grand entrance-hall, and ascended a staircase leading to the first tier of boxes. The corridor outside the boxes on this tier was much less crowded than the rest of the house.

Here the stranger paused.

"Why have you separated me from my friends?" asked the duchess, indignantly.

"For a purpose which is too serious to allow of any useless ceremony," answered the stranger, whose voice was muffled by his mask.

Thus disguised, his accents would have been strange to his nearest and dearest friends. To the duchess they were utterly strange. She tried in vain to remember those tones, but she was unable to do so.

"Where is the duke?" she demanded, eagerly.

"I do not know, madam," answered the stranger, coldly.

The duchess looked at her mysterious guide with a strange thrill of terror.

"You have deceived me, then," she exclaimed.

"Ay, madam, as you deceived Hubert Monkton."

Blanche Mortimer clasped her hands convulsively at the sound of that once familiar name.

"Hubert Monkton!" she murmured; "why do you mention that man's name to me?"

"I have told you before, madam, that I have a solemn purpose to fulfil in bringing you here."

"But I will stay no longer," returned the duchess, indignantly. "I am no child, to be fooled or frightened thus."

As she spoke, she turned from the stranger, and walked rapidly towards the staircase, which they had ascended. Before she had gone half a dozen paces, the hand of the masked guide was laid upon her slender wrist with a grasp of iron.

"Blanche Mortimer," said the unfamiliar voice, "you must — you shall remain. You are in the power of those who can feel no pity. You are in the power of the avengers of the dead!"

"The dead!" cried the terrified duchess.

"Hubert Monkton's friends surround you. The avengers of Hubert Monkton's murder have encircled you on every side."

As the stranger spoke he unlocked a door leading into the ante-chamber communicating with one of the larger private boxes.

He drew the trembling duchess into this ante-chamber, and locked the door behind him.

"Blanche Mortimer," he said, solemnly, "the hour of retribution has come, and the day of discovery is near at hand."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SHADOW OF THE MURDERED.

THE Duchess of Arlington found herself alone with the masked stranger in the ante-chamber of the opera-box.

The door communicating with the box was closed; the door leading into the corridor was locked.

The duchess could hear the music of the monster orchestra; she could hear the footfall of the dancers, the noisy laughter, the wild and reckless merriment in the vast area below, and yet she was alone with this man, as much alone as if she had been in some wild retreat, amid the solitudes of a desert.

Had she screamed aloud in her terror, her wild outcry would have been lost amongst the myriad voices of the careless crowd below.

It was Carnival time,— a time of riot and confusion,— a time of madness and intoxication.

But, although terrified for a brief period, Blanche Mortimer was not subdued.

She felt that she was in the power of those hidden and mysterious enemies who had endeavored to separate her from the Duke of Arlington. She felt, also, that only her own imperious will and daring nature could save her.

"I have not feared my own dark memories, my own secret agonies," she said to herself; "why should I fear these people?"

She looked earnestly at the masked stranger.

He was tall and slim, but his figure was enveloped in a long domino of black silk, which left only the outline of his form visible. The hood of this domino covered his head, and joined the velvet mask which concealed his face. The thick lace fringe hanging from this mask covered his chin.

All that the searching scrutiny of the duchess could reveal to her was the color of the eyes that looked through the oval openings in the black mask.

These eyes were blue, large, and limpid; of that clear but pale azure, which has, in some lights, a greenish hue.

This was all that the duchess could discover of the stranger's personal appearance.

But, as she followed him through the crowd, she had observed a strong and

almost overpowering odor of otto of roses, which seemed to emanate from the silken folds of his domino.

Blanche Mortimer drew herself to her fullest height as the stranger approached her, after locking the door communicating with the corridor.

"Why have you fastened that door?" she asked.

"Because I wish to speak to you without fear of interruption."

"And you refuse to lead me back to my husband?"

"Yes, I do refuse, until you have heard what I have to say."

The duchess burst into a loud and ringing laugh.

"Be it so, then," she said, gayly. "It is Carnival time, and folly reigns supreme in Paris. Why should I refuse to join in a Carnival jest?"

"This is no Carnival jest, madam," answered the stranger. "I told you, some moments since, that I had a solemn purpose in bringing you here."

"Yes," returned Blanche, still laughing with the silvery music of girlish mirth; "and this solemn purpose is to frighten a poor helpless woman out of her senses. But I am not so easily terrified as you may, perhaps, imagine; and can only say that, if your purpose is a solemn one, this place is ill-chosen for its fulfilment."

"Think you so, madam?" replied the stranger. "You little know the hidden secrets, the undiscovered mysteries, that lurk beneath a scene of reckless gayety. The wild mirth of the maskers may drown the shrieks of the dying; the merry music of the orchestra may drown the sobs of the despairing. Do not think that you are the less in danger because you hear music and laughter around you."

"I fear no danger," exclaimed the duchess, with proud defiance. "Whoever and whatever you may be, you shall suffer for this insolence. The Duke of Arlington will avenge the insults offered to his wife."

"While he believes her worthy to be his wife, doubtless, madam," answered the man; "but how will he act when he learns her unworthiness?"

The duchess did not condescend to answer this question.

"You have something to say to me?" she said, coldly.

"I have."

"Will you be so good as to say it as speedily as possible, in order that you may afterwards restore me to my friends, who are, no doubt, searching the opera-house for me."

"I obey, madam," answered the stranger, wheeling forward a luxurious arm-chair, which he offered to the duchess.

Blanche Mortimer threw off her velvet mask, and the long silken domino which had covered her from head to foot.

"This place is insupportably hot," she said, as she flung the domino upon an ottoman near her.

The stranger was silent. He was gazing in rapt admiration upon the beautiful woman who stood before him.

The duchess wore a simple dress of the richest white lace. Her waving golden hair, which hung in ringlets upon her neck and shoulders, was only adorned by a wreath of pure white roses. She wore no jewels, save a pair of massive gold bracelets upon her round white arms.

"It was thus that you appeared to Hubert Monkton," exclaimed the stranger, after a pause. "It was thus the enthusiastic young artist beheld you, — the hapless artist whom you fascinated and destroyed."

Blanche Mortimer threw back her head, with a haughty gesture, and gazed defiantly at the speaker.

"I acknowledge no acquaintance with this Hubert Monkton," she said, "except the ordinary acquaintance between a woman of rank and her drawing-master."

"*You* may refuse to acknowledge any other acquaintance, madam," answered the stranger; "but what if your letters bear witness of a very different acquaintance? What if your letters, written a year ago, bear record of a solemn promise to become that man's wife?"

"My letters!" cried the duchess, clasping her hands before her face.

In that one moment she had lost all presence of mind. In that one moment she had betrayed herself as what she

was, — a terrified and agonized woman, oppressed and tortured by the remorse of crime.

But, with a powerful effort, she again controlled herself.

"There are no such letters in existence," she said, decisively.

"What!" exclaimed the stranger; "did you destroy them with your own hands?"

The duchess was silent.

"You do not reply," returned the mask; "but your silence is in itself a sufficient answer. Think you that any other hand than your own would ever destroy the fatal evidences of your guilt? Think you that those letters, in the keeping of another, would not be held more precious than their weight in diamonds of the finest water?"

"Are those letters in your possession?" asked the duchess.

"What if I answer Yes?"

"If they are in your keeping, tell me the price you demand," replied the duchess. "I will buy them from you on your own terms."

"You are very generous, madam," answered the stranger, with a sneer; "but the letters are not in my possession. They are in the hands of another person."

"Let me see that person, then," cried Blanche Mortimer. "Let me hear what terms his avarice would demand of me."

"He asks nothing. He would see you, and would restore those letters with his own hand."

"Lead me to him, then," exclaimed the duchess. "Why waste this time in idle talk? Let me see him."

"You do not fear to see him then, madam?" asked the stranger.

"Fear! no. Why should I fear?"

"Because this person is not altogether unknown to you. You have seen him before."

"What of that? Let him restore me these letters, and I will look upon him as my greatest friend. Pray take me to him without any further delay."

"There is no occasion," answered the stranger; "he will be here before long."

"Here?"

"Yes. It is now midnight. At a quarter-past twelve he will be here."

"I will wait, then," the duchess answered, quietly.

Her companion opened the door communicating with the box. The curtains of this box were drawn, but the brilliant lights of the theatre penetrated through the folds.

"From behind those curtains your Grace may behold the scene below without fear of being observed," said the stranger.

The duchess passed into the opera-box, and, pushing back the folds of the curtains, looked down upon the vast crowd of maskers on the monstrous platform below. She gazed with eyes which saw not what they looked upon. She was absorbed in doubt and apprehension.

Who were these hidden enemies who had discovered a secret which she had believed to be beyond the power of man to fathom?

The stranger remained in the ante-chamber. The duchess let fall the curtain which she had held back for a few moments while she looked below. She sank into a chair, and waited for the coming of this person, who was said to be the possessor of her letters.

The door between the box and the ante-chamber was ajar.

After waiting for about a quarter of an hour, the duchess heard the sound of a low knock upon the panel of the outer door, the door which opened on the corridor.

Two minutes afterwards, the masked stranger looked into the box.

"The person whom you wish to see is here, madam," he said; "I will bid you good-night."

She heard the outer door close behind him before she entered the ante-chamber. A strange, shuddering terror, which she was powerless to control, seemed to root her to the spot upon which she stood.

Without knowing why, she dreaded crossing the narrow threshold which divided the opera-box from the chamber adjoining it.

The silvery chime of a clock in the anteroom struck the quarter after midnight.

Blanche Mortimer entered this chamber, and found herself alone with the stranger.

He wore a simple evening costume. A black dress-coat, waistcoat, and trousers, and cravat of white cambric.

But, like the man who had led her to the box, he wore a mask.

"You have some letters, once written by me, in your possession," said the duchess.

The man bowed, but did not speak.

The graceful head of the duchess was half turned away from him. It seemed as if her contempt for him was too great to be concealed.

"What is the price which you demand for the restoration of these letters?" she asked, haughtily.

Still the man did not answer, but, lifting his hand, he slowly removed his mask.

As he did so, the duchess, turning her head partially, looked across her shoulder at the man's face.

She uttered a loud and wailing cry, which vibrated through the small apartment, and mingled discordantly with the distant music of the orchestra.

The face upon which she gazed with the stony glance of horror and despair was the face of the dead.

It was the face of Hubert Monkton, line for line, — the face with whose every feature she was familiar.

For one moment, a wild thrill of hope ran through her veins.

What if Hubert Monkton were still alive? What if she had been deceived by Philip Howland, and the Indian, Gambia? What if no murder had been committed in the miserable chamber at the Raven?

But, in another moment, that hope gave way to horror and despair.

The face upon which the duchess looked was not the face of a living man. The features had the rigidity of marble, the complexion was of a sickly bluish-gray, the eyes had a hollow and glassy lustre.

It was indeed the face of the dead.

For a few brief moments Blanche Mortimer gazed wildly and fearfully upon this strange apparition. Then, with a terrible effort, she tottered forward, meaning to defy the ghastly terror; but at the first step she reeled and fell senseless to the ground.

An hour afterwards, the duke and a couple of the officials of the opera-house entered this ante-chamber, after searching almost every part of the vast building, in their endeavors to find the Duchess of Arlington.

What was the surprise and consternation of Gerald Mortimer, on beholding his beloved wife lying senseless on the ground, in the tenantless ante-chamber!

He lifted her in his arms, while one of the officials fetched a glass of iced water.

The duchess slowly revived, and languidly lifted her ivory eyelids, fixing her large blue eyes upon the duke.

At the sight of his face she uttered a cry of delight.

"Oh! thank Heaven!" she murmured; "it is you, Gerald, only you."

"Who else should it be, dearest?" said the duke, tenderly. "Tell me, my darling, what has happened. How is it that I find you here?"

"I lost myself amongst the crowd, Gerald," answered the duchess, "and was driven this way by the throng. Fearful of being knocked down in the hurry and confusion, I entered the first empty box I saw, and I suppose must have fainted from exhaustion and fatigue."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BROTHERS.

Upon the morning after the scene at the masked ball, the Duke and Duchess of Arlington visited the magnificent picture-galleries of the Louvre, — the costly palace of the kings of France, which has been extended and beautified beneath the imperial sway of the two Napoleons who have ruled over Paris.

Theobald Mortimer and Luigi Malatesta accompanied the duke and duchess upon this visit to the picture-galleries.

The Italian was skilled in the arts of his native land. He was not a painter, but he was a critic whose judgment was far above the common; and

the duke was glad to have him by his side in the splendid apartments of the Louvre.

This superb collection of paintings and statuary is open to all who please to go and see it. Rich and poor can alike visit these splendid galleries which, like our own public institutions, are thrown open to the public, without any charge whatever.

The duke and duchess spent some hours in wandering through the vast saloons, accompanied by the Italian and his pupil.

Blanche Mortimer was very pale, and a purple shadow encircled her eyes. She had not recovered the terrible shock of the previous night; but her manner was gay and light-hearted, and she did not reveal the inward tortures which preyed upon her agonized breast.

The Florentine watched her beautiful face, but that face reflected not the sufferings of the mind; yet he *knew* that she did suffer.

As the fashionable and aristocratic party was about to return to the carriage, which was waiting in the courtyard, the duke suddenly stopped, and gazed earnestly at a young man, who, with a pretty girl leaning upon his arm, was standing opposite one of the pictures, near the door of the apartment.

Blanche Mortimer watched her husband with a glance of curiosity. Who could this young man be, who thus attracted the duke's attention? His dress was neat and plain, and he had the air of a gentleman, but not that of a man of rank or fashion.

The duke recognized in this young Englishman, the chemist whom he had met and questioned, upon the night of the 16th of October, in Kale Court, Drury Lane.

As the nobleman stopped, the young man, who was indeed Joseph Maldon, looked up, and recognized the Duke of Arlington.

It will be remembered that Gerald Mortimer had offered to be of service to the obscure chemist, who had not, however, attempted to avail himself of that offer.

Blanche Mortimer looked earnestly at the young man. There was something in his face which seemed strangely familiar to her, and yet when and where could she have seen him?

Suddenly a thought struck her. She turned round, and looked from the chemist to the Florentine, who was standing a few paces behind her, conversing with Theobald Mortimer.

There was a strong resemblance between Joseph Maldon and Luigi Malatesta.

And yet it was one of those resemblances which are not apt to strike the careless eye of a stranger, although plainly perceptible to a penetrating gaze.

The one feature in which this resemblance was strongest was the upper lip. This feature had a restless, nervous motion, both in the Italian and the young chemist.

"These men are related to each other," the duchess thought; "and yet they appear to be perfect strangers."

She watched Joseph Maldon and Luigi Malatesta, but no glance or gesture of recognition passed between them.

The duke addressed the chemist.

"I am surprised to see you here," he said; "and I was also surprised at not seeing you, last October, at my house in London."

The young man colored, and answered with some hesitation.

"I did not like to intrude upon your Grace," he said, "for I felt that I had no claim upon your generosity."

"That was for me to decide," replied the duke, kindly. "No matter; you shall lose nothing by your modesty. You can call upon me here; my apartments are in the Champs Elysées."

Joseph Maldon bowed, and the duke passed on, with his wife upon his arm.

Theobald Mortimer and Luigi Malatesta followed.

"Why do you take so great an interest in this young man, Gerald?" asked the duchess, as they descended the staircase.

"Because I think him clever," answered the duke—"very clever, and very poor. There is terrible danger for a man thus situated, and there is something in the bright restlessness of that young man's face which tells me that he is ambitious. For the ambi-

tious there are temptations, from which a powerful and helping hand alone can save them."

"What, then, would you do for him?"

"I would rescue him from these dangers, by giving him a career in life."

"My noble Gerald!" exclaimed the duchess, "this is indeed worthy of you. You think, then, that this man would be capable of —"

"Capable of a crime, perhaps," answered the duke. "There is that in his countenance which bespeaks ambition. Ambition is ever unscrupulous: if it cannot obtain the prizes of life by a straight course, it will try to attain them by a crooked one."

No more was said upon the subject. The carriage conveyed the party back to the Champs Elysées, and the duchess retired to her own apartments.

That evening the Duke of Arlington gave a dinner to some of the most distinguished members of the French nobility. Beautiful and admired, the duchess formed the starry centre of this circle of rank and fashion. It would have been almost impossible, for those who gazed upon her lovely and almost childlike face, to believe that she was the same woman who had fallen, conscience-stricken and agonized, upon the floor of the ante-chamber at the opera-house.

Luigi Malatesta was present at this dinner-party. His learning and accomplishments made him a person of some importance in every assembly. People did not stop to ask whether he was rich or noble: he was one of those men who seem born to command, and to whom neither the purse-proud nor presumptuous would care to offer an insult.

But at ten o'clock the Florentine disappeared from the crowded drawing-room, and his disappearance was especially noticed by one person in the brilliant assembly.

That person was the Duchess of Arlington.

Ever since the conversation in her boudoir, in which Hubert Monkton's name had been mentioned by the Italian, Blanche Mortimer had kept a close watch upon the movements of Luigi Malatesta; but she had not been able to keep this watch unassisted; she had been compelled to avail herself of the service of her footman, Philip Howland.

This man had received his instructions from his mistress, and he knew what was expected of him.

He was to follow Luigi Malatesta wherever he went, except when the Italian left the house with the duke and duchess.

The ormolu clock upon the chimney-piece of the outer drawing-room struck ten as the Florentine glided softly from the apartment, and passed into the corridor leading to the anteroom in which Philip Howland waited, with his fellow-servants, to announce the guests who arrived after dinner.

Two minutes after Luigi Malatesta had passed through this anteroom and descended the staircase, Philip Howland took up his hat and prepared to follow.

One of the footmen asked him where he was going at so late an hour.

"I have forgotten to post a letter which her Grace gave me," he answered; "my orders were very particular; and, late as it is, I must go to the general post-office."

He hurried down the staircase, and reached the pathway beneath the trees in the Champs Elysées in time to overtake the Italian, who was walking at a rapid pace towards the Place de la Concorde.

Luigi Malatesta made his way towards one of the narrow and crooked streets in the Quartier Saint Germains, still followed closely by the footman, who had wrapped himself in a great-coat, which effectually concealed his livery.

The streets of Paris were crowded with maskers hurrying to the numerous balls, held in every quarter of the city at this season, and amongst the many foot-passengers Philip Howland easily escaped observation.

The street in which the Florentine stopped was not very far from that to which he had been led by his mysterious visitor upon the night of his interview with the masked woman.

Luigi Malatesta paused beneath one

of the lamps which dimly lighted the narrow thoroughfare, and, taking a letter from his pocket, referred to it for the address of the house he sought.

The letter was a brief one. It was worded thus: —

"My dear Luigi, — Circumstances have brought me to Paris. I saw and recognized you yesterday in a carriage which bore a ducal coronet. You were always luckier than me. I traced you to the house of the Duke of Arlington. If you have any memory of the far-away past, in which we were boyish travellers upon the same pathway in life, come to me. If not, forget one who, in the struggle of ambitious youth and hope, has been hitherto the vanquished.

"Yours ever,
"Giuseppe.

"P. S. — I am staying at a wretched lodging, at No. 47 in the Rue Gueneville. You will find me at home after six o'clock every evening. I shall remember all old precautions, and not recognize you by word or gesture, should we meet in the presence of others. I am known at my lodgings as Charles Lancy."

"Number forty-seven," murmured Luigi, as he refolded the letter and looked at the number of the house by which he stood.

With some difficulty he found the number that he sought, and, pushing open the door of the house, entered, and spoke to an old man who acted as porter.

He asked for M. Lancy's apartment.

The old man directed him to ascend to the fourth floor.

The room fronting the street upon this story was that occupied by the person he sought.

Luigi Malatesta ascended the staircase with a rapid step. As he did so, Philip Howland pushed open the door, and entered the dingy and dirty hall, in which the porter sat warming his skinny hands at a small earthenware stove.

"Will you allow me to wait here while my friend remains upstairs, monsieur?" he said, addressing the old man.

"Certainly, monsieur," the porter replied, politely. "You are the friend, then, of the gentleman who has just gone upstairs to see Monsieur Lancy?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Ah! then, doubtless, you also are a friend of Monsieur Lancy, and his invalid young wife?" asked the chattering old porter.

"No," answered Philip Howland; "I do not know M. Lancy."

As he said this, the footman took a memorandum-book from his pocket, and wrote in it the following words: —

"Lancy, 47 Rue Gueneville."

Five minutes afterwards he spoke to the porter.

"As my friend seems to be making rather a long visit," he said, "I will leave him to complete it at his leisure. You can tell him I grew tired of waiting."

Philip Howland left the house before the porter had time to reply; but he did not go far. He merely crossed the street, and concealed himself in the shadows of an arched doorway opposite the house he had just quitted.

All the windows in the front of this house, except one, were dark. This one lighted window was on the fourth floor.

It was the window of Joseph Maldon's apartment. The young man had engaged this miserable chamber in the most obscure quarter of Paris under a false name.

In that apartment the chemist and the Florentine were seated at a little table near the stove.

At the other end of the room a ragged cloth curtain concealed an alcove, in which the wasted form of a sleeping woman lay upon a wretched bed. On one side of the apartment stood a wooden dresser, covered with crucibles, phials, and other chemical apparatus.

"She is dying, then, Giuseppe," said Luigi Malatesta, looking towards the curtain, behind which the sleeping woman lay.

"Yes," answered Joseph Maldon, whom the Florentine had addressed as Giuseppe (the Italian for Joseph), "yes, she has been dying for the last six months; but she cannot last much longer."

"What is this lingering disease which kills so slowly?" asked Luigi, looking earnestly at the pale face of the chemist.

"Consumption," answered Joseph.

"Consumption?" repeated the Florentine. "When I saw your wife, a

twelvemonth since, in London, she did not appear to me to be consumptive."

"Perhaps not, brother," answered the chemist, with a sneer; "but we have lived in one of the lowest neighborhoods of crowded London; we have lived cheek-by-jowl with fever and cholera; we have breathed the pestiferous air which breeds sickness and death; we have suffered from a disease which men call poverty, neglected and forgotten by those who might have helped us."

"If you mean that I might have helped you, brother," replied the Italian, coldly, "you forget what I told you. Every shilling that I possess is devoted to one unalterable purpose. I have told you before to-night, — wait!"

"Ay," returned Joseph, bitterly, "wait until our hair is gray, and our limbs palsied with age. Brother," he added, passionately, "we are both ambitious, but our ambition is of a different order: you seek the empty honor of a high-sounding title, echoed by the lips of men; I seek the wealth which alone is positive power. You would be great! I would be rich!"

"Which is the higher ambition?" asked Luigi Malatesta, with a proud smile.

"I neither know nor care," replied Joseph; "but I know which is the wiser."

The Florentine shrugged his shoulders scornfully.

"Giuseppe Malatesta," he said, gravely, "I am ten years your senior, and it is now nearly fifteen years ago since I sent you from Florence to England in the care of one who would, I fondly believed, have placed you in the path of greatness. The old scholar, Petrarcho Montanari, would have educated you for the church. You chose to fly from his humble lodging and to pursue your own pathway. It has led you to this garret. I need say no more upon the wisdom of your choice."

"And I will answer you in your own words, Luigi," returned the chemist. "I say to you, as you said to me just now, 'Wait!'"

"Who was that young girl with whom I saw you to-day?" asked Luigi, after a pause.

"She is the daughter of an English merchant called Burton," answered Joseph.

His pale cheeks crimsoned suddenly, as he spoke, and he averted his eyes, as if unable to meet the searching glance of his elder brother.

"Humph!" muttered the Italian. "So you amuse yourself in the society of this pretty English girl while your wife is dying in this wretched garret," he said, sternly. "Is Mr. Burton's daughter aware that you are married?"

"She is not."

"Indeed! And she is rich, I suppose, this English girl?"

"Yes; she has a fortune."

Joseph Maldon answered these two questions with the manner of one who would willingly have refused to reply to them had he dared. Clever and unscrupulous as the young man was, he was evidently in the power of his elder brother.

"Giuseppe Malatesta, or Joseph Maldon, as you have chosen to call yourself," said the Jesuit, gravely, "the secrets which you veil from the eyes of other men are transparent to me. I say nothing to you of the pathway which you have chosen; I only say to you, beware! The low ambition which seeks wealth for itself alone is the ambition of the thief and the murderer, — the ambition which leads to the gallows. Be warned by me, my brother, before it is too late to be saved by the voice of warning. The instrument which I have chosen is DIPLOMACY; the instrument which you have preferred is CRIME."

"Crime!" exclaimed Joseph.

"Yes," answered Luigi Malatesta, pointing to the bed. "Look at that dying woman, and repent while there is yet time. You would be released from the bonds which tie you to that ill-used girl. You would marry this Englishwoman that you may become possessed of her fortune. I say to you with the solemn accents of the church, beware! The wealth which is obtained by a crime is accursed. The prize which is won by guilt is the arch-mockery of Satan."

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CHAPTER XXIX.

SLOW POISON.

THE chemist, Joseph Maldon, remained silent, as if crushed by the terrible words which the Jesuit had uttered.

There is something in the voice of truth which has a power to penetrate the hardest heart.

Cold-blooded, calculating, unscrupulous, and ambitious as this man was, he was stricken to the soul by those solemn and awful words.

He covered his face with his hands, and cowered before the erect form of his accuser.

"O Giuseppe," said the Florentine, "Giuseppe, my brother, we were little children together, far away in the sunny south! We were innocent in those bygone days. I say to you pause, pause while there is yet time. Upon the threshold of a terrible crime I cry to you with the voice of warning. I point to the dark pathways, the horrible gulfs which lie beyond, hidden by the dense veil of the future. Will you refuse to hear that warning?"

Joseph Maldon removed his hands from his face. That face was ashy pale, but the light of a resolute will shone in the large dark eyes, and the younger brother returned the gaze of the elder with defiance in his glance.

"By what right do you talk to me thus?" he asked, indignantly.

"By the right of your ill-doing," answered Luigi Malatesta; "look at that stricken girl," he added, pointing once more to the bed, — "almost a child in years, more than a woman in suffering. Give me the lamp, Giuseppe; I would look upon her."

"No, no," said Joseph Maldon. "She is very ill, and the light will disturb her."

"What!" exclaimed Luigi Malatesta; "you fear that I should see her?"

"Fear?" echoed the other; "no; why should I fear? Take the lamp, and gaze upon her as long as you will. But I warn you that you are committing a cruelty in disturbing her."

"She has endured many cruelties already, Giuseppe," said the Florentine, with a grave significance; "she will scarcely heed me."

Luigi Malatesta took the lamp in his hand and crossed the room to the alcove, in which the bed was situated. He drew back the faded and shabby curtain, and gazed earnestly at the face of the sleeper.

Margaret Maldon was the wreck of a girl who had once been pretty, fresh and blooming, joyous and light-hearted.

Her face was wasted, her cheeks hollow and sunken, her forehead disfigured by premature wrinkles. But that in which her face was most changed was in its color. A year before, she had had a fair and rosy complexion; now, her skin was of the ghastly grayish tint of an inhabitant of the grave.

"She is indeed changed," murmured Luigi Malatesta, without removing his eyes from the face of the slumbering girl, who still slept in the weary, torpid sleep of exhaustion; "she is indeed changed. The hues of her complexion, the black circles which surround her eyes, are not the diagnostics of consumption. You remember that I am something of a physician, Giuseppe. I studied the rudiments of the science of medicine some years since; for a man who would be great should be familiar with all sciences. Margaret Maldon is not dying of consumption."

"Indeed!" answered Joseph Maldon, with a sneer. "You are like all other amateurs, Luigi; you pretend to know more than the professors of the art. If my wife is not dying of consumption, of what disease is she dying?"

"I will tell you, Giuseppe Malatesta," answered his brother: "she is dying of the disease which attacked the foes of Lucretia Borgia, and Catharine de Medici. She is dying of the disease which killed Charles the Ninth of France. She is dying because she is *in the way*. She is dying because her death will clear the pathway by which a richer bride will walk to the altar."

"Beware, Luigi, how you utter these slanders!" exclaimed Joseph Maldon.

"She is dying from the effects of antimony given in small doses," continued Luigi Malatesta, in a cold and relent-

less voice. "She is perishing from the fatal influence of a poison, which has slowly consumed her youth, her beauty, and her life."

"It is a lie!" cried the infuriated chemist, springing towards his brother, as if he would have flung him to the ground.

Luigi Malatesta laughed aloud.

"It is for you to beware, Giuseppe," he said; "the children of the church can defend themselves. Attempt to prevent my departure from this room, and I will stab you to the heart. I go to save you from a crime."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Joseph Maldon.

"I go to seek one who may have the power to restore that wretched woman, and to save your soul from the black stain of murder."

"You would not denounce me?" cried the chemist, as his brother walked towards the door.

"Denounce you!" exclaimed the Florentine, "denounce you! no; you do not understand me, Giuseppe Malatesta. Think you I would betray my own flesh and blood? *I go to save you.*"

He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Joseph Maldon stood as if rooted to the spot upon which his brother had left him.

He lifted one hand to his restless lips, and gnawed convulsively at his finger-nails.

"What does he mean?" he muttered. "This is some trap, perhaps. Curses upon his infernal penetration! He has discovered all, even the secret which I thought hidden from every eye, and he would betray me,—save me, as he says,—reveal my story, and solicit pity and forbearance for my crime; restore this woman to life; tie a log about me, and send me forth into the world to fight the battle of fortune afresh, with every chance against me. No, no, it shall not be so. I will defeat him yet."

He rushed across the room, gathered the phials and drugs together that lay scattered upon the table at which he had been at work, and put them into a leathern box that was secured by a padlock, the key of which he wore attached to his watch-chain.

He then searched the bare and desolate-looking apartment, collected every scrap of paper, burning some documents, and thrusting others into his coat-pocket.

There were no articles of value in the room; all bespoke the lowest depth of poverty; and, after collecting the few things of which we have spoken, the chemist left no vestige of his presence in the apartment. Having completed these brief preparations, he put on his hat, and with the lamp in his hand, walked towards the bed.

His wife was still asleep, breathing uneasily, murmuring sometimes in her slumber, but still sleeping.

He watched her for a few moments with a terrible expression in his face. It is to be hoped that such a glance rarely falls upon the unconscious sleeper as that which dwelt with a lingering gaze upon this sick woman.

"You refused to leave me when I asked you to do so," he said, in a low voice; "you prated to me of the strength of your affection, the eternity of your love; and you vowed that you would share poverty with me, without a tear, without a murmur. You have been a hindrance to my upward path in the hill of life. You would have held me down in poverty and obscurity; and now, at the last moment, when my work is nearly done, Luigi Malatesta comes to me with his puling sentimentality, and offers to *save me;* to save me by blasting my prospects and blighting my hopes. But they know not the man with whom they have to deal."

He placed the lamp upon the table, and, seating himself by the bedside, drew a small phial from his waistcoat-pocket.

The invalid's medicine-bottles and a cracked wine-glass stood upon the table.

Joseph Maldon poured one drop of the transparent fluid contained in the phial into the empty wine-glass, which he afterwards filled with the medicine in one of the bottles.

Then, drawing back the ragged curtain, he bent over the sleeping woman,

and murmured in a low but distinct voice: —

"Margaret! Margaret!"

The sick woman started in her sleep and trembled violently. Then, slowly lifting her heavy eyelids, she turned her dull eyes on the face of the speaker.

"Joseph," she said in a hoarse and feeble whisper, "Joseph, is it you?"

"Yes, Margaret; it is time for you to take your medicine."

"Again!" said the woman, with a weary sigh. "It is not two hours since I had the last."

"Perhaps not," answered the chemist, coldly; "but it is time for you to take the next dose. Besides, I am going out, and shall not return till midnight."

"Midnight," murmured the woman; "it must be nearly midnight now."

The invalid was right. The sonorous chimes of Notre Dame pealed out the three quarters after eleven as she spoke.

It wanted only fifteen minutes to that mysterious hour which closes one day and commences another.

"You will not leave me at such a late hour, Joseph," pleaded the sick woman.

"I must," answered Joseph Maldon, in the same cold, emotionless voice; "I have particular business which must be transacted to-night, late though it is. You will not miss me, for you will be sleeping. Come, Margaret," he added, impatiently, "do not hinder me any longer, but take your medicine."

He handed her the glass, and she lifted it with a weak and trembling hand to her pale lips.

He turned away from her as she drank the medicine, and his averted face was of a sickly whiteness.

He took the empty glass from her hand, but in returning it to the table he let it fall, apparently by inadvertence. Instead of picking it up, he ground his heel upon it, and crushed it into a thousand atoms.

"The glass was cracked," he said; as if to explain this strange action.

The sick woman did not heed him; she lay with her hollow eyes fixed upon him, but there was that in her face which told of serious thought.

As he was moving towards the door with the leathern box under his arm, but concealed by the loose folds of his outer coat, she stopped him with a gesture of her wasted hand.

"Joseph Maldon," she said, solemnly, in a voice which had gathered strength in the desperation of her quiet grief; "Joseph Maldon, you are going to leave me?"

"Yes, Margaret," the chemist answered, with affected carelessness; "but only for a few hours."

"Forever, Joseph, forever," returned the solemn voice of the sick woman. "Do you think I have been blind? Ah! would to Heaven that I had been blind! But I have seen all, only too plainly. I told you nearly six months ago that I knew all. You affected not to understand me; but you did understand me as well as you do now. I tell you once again that I know all; but I tell you yet more, —whatever evil you may have done me, Joseph Maldon, I forgive you with all my heart, and I pray that Heaven may forgive your sin as freely as I do."

She stretched out her thin hand, and looked imploringly at his ghastly face.

He could not take that hand; he could not meet that pleading gaze.

Who shall say that the criminal does not suffer? In that one moment he suffered a lifetime of anguish. In that one moment he endured an agony for which years of luxury and wealth could not atone.

"You are feverish, Margaret," he said, hurriedly; and before the invalid could reply he had left the room.

He ran downstairs, muttered a few hasty words in French to the porter, who believed him to be a Frenchman, pushed open the heavy door, and went out into the street.

Let us retrace our steps for about half an hour, and follow the Florentine, Luigi Malatesta, as he left the house in which his brother lodged.

As he was passing out into the street, the porter spoke to him.

"Your friend grew tired of waiting, monsieur," he said, "and went away half an hour ago."

"My friend!" exclaimed the Jesuit, in a tone of unmitigated surprise; "whom do you mean?"

"The gentleman who came with you,

monsieur," answered the old man; "that is to say, the gentleman who entered the house two minutes after you ascended the staircase."

"Indeed!" muttered Luigi Malatesta; "this gentleman entered the house immediately after me?"

"Yes, monsieur; but he grew impatient, and went away half an hour ago."

"Enough," said the Florentine, dropping a franc into the porter's hand, and passing out into the street.

"So," he muttered, as he looked about, trying to penetrate the darkness and the thick-falling rain, "I am followed, — am I? I have spies dogging my heels. This man must have followed me from the house whence I came. That is enough to tell me whose handiwork this is. The Duchess of Arlington is afraid of me. *I know too much.*"

An icy shiver ran through the Florentine's veins as he pronounced these words. Hubert Monkton had been murdered because of the secret he possessed. What if Blanche Mortimer, — this pitiless fiend, who concealed her cold-blooded and calculating wickedness beneath the outward semblance of an angel, — what if she should try to murder *him?*

"I know that which shall be my safeguard," he thought, after a pause. "I know the kind of woman I have to deal with, and I know how to deal with her."

He walked through several of the narrow and winding streets at a rapid pace, looking every now and then behind him, to see if he were followed. But, late as it was, the streets were not deserted. Foot passengers were hurrying to and fro in the darkness, and in the obscurity of the rainy night he could not recognize either the face or figure of any one behind him.

He was followed. Philip Howland had waited patiently in the porch opposite the house in which Joseph Maldon lived, and had followed Luigi Malatesta when he left the Rue Gueneville.

The Florentine walked past the Hotel Cluny, and entered a broad but lonely street, about a quarter of a mile beyond.

He stopped at a door in a garden wall, behind which appeared the upper windows of a little pavilion, built in the reign of Louis XV. A light — brilliant, clear, and starlike — shone from one of these windows.

The others were wrapped in darkness.

Luigi Malatesta rang a bell, which vibrated loudly in the stillness of this lonely quarter.

Philip Howland sheltered himself again in the shadow of a massive doorway, nearly opposite this pavilion.

It was upwards of five minutes before the door was opened. When it was so, the figure of an elderly man, wearing a long black dressing-gown, and carrying a lamp, appeared upon the threshold.

The face revealed by the light of that lamp was very beautiful.

I do not mean beautiful in the ordinary sense of the word, — not beautiful in regularity of feature or brilliancy of coloring. It had the quiet and pale beauty of old age; the beauty which comes from a holy mind. It was like the face of some saint of old.

This man was a Jesuit; but this man was a true disciple of Ignatius Loyola. He mingled not worldly ambition with holy aspirations. He devoted his life to deeds of mercy and self-sacrifice.

But he was not only a priest; he was also a man of science, though he employed science only for the benefit of his fellow-creatures.

He was the greatest chemist in the city of Paris.

He knew the terrible secrets of the past, — the secrets of Lucretia Borgia and Catharine de Medici. He was acquainted with the poisons which these fiend-like women employed; but he knew yet more: he was familiar with their antidotes.

To the secrets of the wonderful antidotes employed amongst the Italian poisoners he had peculiarly devoted himself; for in this branch of the science he foresaw a new power, by which he might be of service to his fellow-men.

"Father Durcel," exclaimed the Florentine, in an agitated and hurried voice, "put on your coat and hat; I want you to come with me."

The Jesuit did not wait for any explanation of this request. He went back to the pavilion, followed by Luigi Malatesta, and exchanged his dressing-gown for a plain black coat.

"What is wrong, my son?" he asked, presently. "What will be required of me?"

"Your utmost skill, father," answered the Florentine. "A woman has been poisoned: she is dying, slowly but surely, from the effects of that poison. If it were possible, I would have you save her, — restore her to life, and save the soul of the man who has attempted to murder her."

Father Durcel crossed the room to an ebony cabinet, which he unlocked and opened. The interior of this cabinet was fitted with rows of tiny drawers, each labelled with a Latin inscription, and with ranges of narrow shelves, filled with infinitesimal bottles.

"What poison has this woman suffered from?" he asked.

"I think — antimony."

"It is most likely to be so. In cases of slow poisoning, antimony is the drug most generally used. The guilty and unhappy creatures who employ it little know how easily their crime can be detected," said Father Durcel, as he took a couple of phials from one of his shelves.

"Come, my son," he added, after closing and locking the cabinet, "I am ready."

Father Durcel followed Luigi Malatesta out of the pavilion, and closed the door behind him.

An old woman, who waited upon the good priest, slept upon the basement; but she had long since retired to rest.

Luigi Malatesta and Father Durcel walked rapidly towards the Rue Gueneville, still followed by the footman, Philip Howland.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PHANTOM AT THE MASKED BALL.

At the same hour as that in which Luigi Malatesta and Father Durcel hurried towards the Rue Gueneville upon their mission of mercy, Theobald Mortimer sat alone in a little study, leading out of his bedroom.

The dinner-party had broken up an hour before, and Theobald had retired for the night, but not to sleep. The fatal fascination which held him spell-bound in the presence of his uncle's wife was too strong upon him. His imagination was bewitched. His senses were bewildered. He could think of nothing save that brilliant and beautiful creature whose image had enslaved his better self.

"How weak, how wicked I am!" he exclaimed, as he paced up and down the small chamber; "false to every impulse of honor; false to all memory of the past; a traitor alike to love and friendship. What do I not deserve for my folly?"

He paced up and down the narrow room, his arms folded and his head bent; but he could not chase the radiant image from his memory; he could not banish the beautiful face from his vision.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, "I can see her now, smiling before me, with the stars reflected in the limpid azure of her eyes, with the golden sunlight gleaming in her glittering hair."

Again he was silent for some moments; and then again he resumed that bitter and reproachful self-communing.

"I will leave Paris to-morrow morning," he exclaimed. "Yes, I will return to honor and to Adela."

He sank into a chair near his writing-table, and, taking a letter from his pocket, drew it from the envelope, and glanced at the contents.

"My poor girl!" he murmured; "this is her last letter, — the letter in which she reproaches me for my silence and neglect. She shall reproach me no longer. I will answer this letter to-night, and will announce my immediate return to Arlington Woods."

He spread a sheet of paper upon his desk, dipped his pen in the ink, and was about to write.

But before he could commence, his door was flung open, and four men burst, without ceremony, into his room.

Four men, who wore Carnival

dresses, and had the noisy, half-drunken manner of maskers who had been dancing and drinking for two or three hours.

They were none of them masked, and they were all of them utter strangers to Theobald Mortimer.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed the young man, indignantly, "may I ask the meaning of this intrusion?"

"It means, my dear fellow," answered one of the men, laying his hands upon Theobald's arm with Carnival familiarity, "that, instead of moping all night in your solitary chamber, you are summoned to attend the opera-house ball, and, moreover," added the man, with mock gravity, "your presence is very much required."

"For what purpose?" asked Theobald.

"To meet a lady."

"What is her name?" demanded the young man, starting suddenly to his feet. In spite of his better sense, this strange summons had excited his curiosity.

"Who sent you here, gentlemen?" he asked.

"That is exactly the secret which we cannot reveal, monsieur," answered the most talkative of the men, laying his hand upon his heart, as if to vouch for his truth, "for the very simple reason that — we do not know. Our story is not a long one. Shall I tell it to monsieur?" he added, in an insinuating tone.

"Yes," exclaimed Theobald; "pray tell me all."

"Monsieur, I am distinguished for my innocence and candor," returned the man who wore a false nose, and a Punchinello's dress. "We were seated at a table in the refreshment-room at the opera-house, drinking a bottle of wine, which would have been our last,— for our purses were empty, — when our attention was drawn to a man in a domino and mask, who stood at a little distance, staring at us as if he wished to take the portraits of all four. But we are not bashful, monsieur, and we endured his impertinence with angelic patience, when, to our surprise, he approached and addressed us: 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'have you any wish to earn five Napoleons between you?' We all agreed; and I, as the most gifted with the power of eloquence, answered him. 'Most worshipful domino,' I replied, 'we are ready to do anything, that benefits honest men to do, for the reward you offer; but if you want us to assassinate the Emperor of France, you must bribe us considerably higher.' The domino laughed, and then explained that all we had to do was to come here and carry you off to the opera, where we are to convey you to a particular spot, at which the domino will await our coming. That, monsieur, is all that I have to tell. Will you come?"

"I will," exclaimed Theobald Mortimer. "Wherever this adventure may lead me, I will see the end of it. But tell me," he added, addressing the man with the false nose, "did you observe any peculiarity about this black domino by which you could describe him to me?"

"None," returned the man; "he was tall and slender, but his face was entirely concealed by his mask, the lace fringe of which covered his chin. Stay, though, — upon second thoughts, I do remember one peculiarity about him."

"And what was it?" asked Theobald, eagerly.

"As he bent over the table when talking to me, I observed a powerful odor of otto of roses, which seemed to emanate from the folds of his silken domino."

Theobald smiled.

"He is a fop, then, this black domino," he said. "Come, gentlemen, I am ready."

He put on his hat, took a velvet mask from the mantel-piece, and secured it over his face, and followed the four men down the broad staircase into the hall.

A hack-carriage was waiting at the door, large enough to accommodate the five men.

Theobald Mortimer had resp[illegible] to the strange summ[illegible] this unhappy of curiosity; but he [illegible] effects of poison," reason. He was gl[illegible] ture, even of any [illegible] t him in surprise. prevent his dwelling [illegible] he exclaimed.

passion, which had lately absorbed his mind.

The carriage drove rapidly to the opera-house. The man dressed as Punchinello slipped his arm through that of Theobald Mortimer.

"You are my prisoner of war," he said, laughing, "and we will stick together; my comrades must take care of themselves. Follow, gentlemen," he cried, turning to the other three. "I go to receive the reward. If you doubt my honor, follow closely."

He dragged Theobald through the crowd and on to the stage, which was covered with dancers. He hurried on until they reached one of the pillars of the proscenium.

Here he stopped.

A man wearing a black mask, domino, and hood, was leaning against this pillar. "Gentlemen," said the Punchinello, with mock ceremony, "allow me to present you to each other; and to claim my five Napoleons."

"Which you have earned so quickly, that I shall multiply them into twenty," replied the domino, gravely, as he handed a bank-note to the masker.

"Come, monsieur."

He slipped his arm through that of Theobald, and led him away through the crowd, and into one of the corridors.

In this corridor he paused before the door of the box in which the Duchess of Arlington had beheld the shadow of the dead.

The domino opened the door of this box.

"You are expected," he said, motioning to Theobald to enter.

"By whom?"

"By a lady. Surely you are too gallant to keep her waiting. Enter."

He pointed to the open door of the ante-chamber, and drew aside.

Theobald Mortimer walked past him, and entered the small apartment. — The ante-chamber was dimly lighted, and the curtains of the box were drawn.

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THE PHANTOM by those thick cur-

At the same he perceived a shad-
Luigi Malatest in white, standing on the threshold between the ante-chamber and the box.

Seen thus, it was impossible to distinguish the features, or even the outline of this figure. A shadowy form robed in white was all that Theobald Mortimer beheld.

The door closed behind him, and he was alone, — alone with this shadow, as the duchess had been with the shadow of the dead.

But his heart was free from guilt, and he did not fear.

"Who and what are you?" he exclaimed; "and why do you summon me thus mysteriously?"

"In order to warn you of a danger," answered the phantom, in low, yet solemn tones.

"Of what danger?"

"The worst of dangers to a young and susceptible heart. You love a guilty woman."

"It is false!" cried Theobald Mortimer. "I love one who — I — I love my cousin, the most innocent of women."

A low, mocking laugh sounded from the pale lips of the shadow.

"Do not trifle with me," replied the solemn voice; "you no longer love your cousin, Adela Mortimer. Her image has been swept from your heart by the image of a murderess!"

"What mean you?" exclaimed Theobald. "What madness is this which you utter?"

"It is no madness, Theobald Mortimer," answered the voice. "Those who warn you of your sinful folly have no selfish motive. They would save you. They would save you from the coils of a guilty woman; they would rescue you from the spells of a wicked enchantress. Be warned, while there is yet time. Gerald Mortimer heard the voice of warning; but he refused to heed it. His folly be upon his own head. Blanche Mortimer, the Duchess of Arlington, is a murderess! She plotted the foul and treacherous murder of the artist, Hubert Monkton."

"It is a lie!" cried Theobald, springing towards the phantom form with a gesture of sudden fury. "It is a black and bitter lie!"

But there was no answer to his passionate words.

The phantom drew suddenly back. The door of the opera-box was shut in his face.

He knocked loudly at the door, but he received no answer. He tried the handle, but in vain. The door had been locked on the other side.

He rushed down the staircase, and on to the other side.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TOO LATE.

THE clock of Notre Dame chimed the half-hour after midnight, as Luigi Malatesta and Father Durcel entered the Rue Gueneville, followed by Philip Howland.

All was dark in the narrow street, except in the one solitary window of the room lately occupied by Joseph Maldon.

There a feeble light still flickered.

The door of the house was closed for the night; but Luigi Malatesta rang a bell, and the porter appeared, yawning wearily and half asleep, to answer his summons.

He seemed very much surprised on perceiving a stranger. He had expected that it was one of the lodgers in the house returning from a Carnival ball.

"Whom do you wish to see, monsieur?" he asked.

"Monsieur Lancy."

"Monsieur Lancy has gone out."

"Gone out? Impossible!" exclaimed Luigi.

"Nay, monsieur, I assure you that it is perfectly true," replied the porter. "Monsieur Lancy left the house a few minutes before twelve o'clock. He said that he would return, I think, but I did not quite catch his words."

"No matter," returned Luigi; "this gentleman is a physician who is so good as to visit Madame Lancy. We will go upstairs. You can tell Monsieur Lancy that we are here, when he returns."

The Florentine ascended the stairs followed by Father Durcel. They reached the fourth story, and entered the room which the young chemist had so lately left.

All was quiet. The lamp burned with a feeble light upon the table near the bed.

"How cruel to leave her!" murmured Luigi Malatesta, as he approached the closely drawn curtains before the alcove in which the bed was placed.

Father Durcel also drew near to this alcove; but the two men paused for a moment reverently and solemnly. They hesitated before they disturbed the sick woman.

Luigi Malatesta drew back the curtains and gazed upon the slumbering form, which lay, motionless as marble, upon the wretched pallet.

"Her sleep seems like a stupor," he said. "I cannot even hear her breathing."

Father Durcel motioned him aside, and bent silently over the couch.

Margaret Maldon's hand lay, white and powerless, upon the coverlet.

The priest took this attenuated hand in his own, and held it for a moment.

Then, stooping over the sleeper's lips, he listened,—listened quietly for a few moments.

"We are too late," he said; "the murderer has done his work."

"O merciful heaven!" exclaimed the Florentine; "do not tell me that she is dead!"

"It is too true," murmured Father Durcel; "the villain has accomplished his deed of darkness."

"But, but," interposed Luigi Malatesta, hesitating, "we are not certain, after all, that this unhappy woman has died from the effects of poison."

The Florentine would have gladly caught at any feeble reed by which he could have proved the innocence of his younger brother. Ambitious, unscrupulous though he was himself, he could not bear to contemplate the foul deed of murder; no common murder; but the most treacherous, the most horrible, —the murder of a woman who had loved and trusted in her destroyer.

"We are not sure that this unhappy girl has died from the effects of poison," he repeated.

The priest looked at him in surprise.

"What, my son," he exclaimed,

"did you not tell me half an hour ago that—"

"I told you that I *thought*—that I *suspected*—Father Durcel," answered Luigi Malatesta, with considerable confusion,—"I suspected that poison had been used. I was not certain."

"You may be certain now," said the priest, gravely; "this girl *has* died from the effects of poison; and you were right in naming that poison. It is antimony."

"Can you discover this so easily?" asked Luigi.

"Yes, there is that in the appearance of the unhappy creature who is cold and dead before me, that tells me the cause of her death. Stay," exclaimed the priest suddenly; "what is this?"

He had trodden upon a fragment of the broken glass which Joseph Maldon had crushed beneath his foot.

Father Durcel took the lamp in his hand, and knelt upon the ground, in order to examine the object upon which he had trodden.

He gathered the fragments of glass together, and placed them in the palm of his hand. Then, replacing the lamp upon the table, he bent over it and examined these fragments.

"The secret is here," he said; "these morsels of glass are the remains of the vessel in which the poison was administered to the victim. These hold an unerring clue to the murderer's guilt. The wretch has thought to destroy this fatal evidence; but he has failed. He has failed, as crime must always fail to escape detection. The hand of Heaven points to the deed of guilt, and it is in vain that man would endeavor to fly that accusing power."

Luigi Malatesta sank into a chair near the bed. He trembled violently in every limb. He had hoped to save his guilty brother from the deadly burden of a horrible crime; and he had only hastened the consummation of that crime; he had only pointed to the detection of the criminal.

"Joseph has fled," he thought; "he has distrusted my honor, and has fled, after sacrificing this unhappy girl, in order to clear his pathway to fortune."

Father Durcel folded the fragments of glass in a piece of white paper, and placed them carefully in his waistcoat-pocket.

"I shall analyze these to-morrow," he said, "and submit my analysis to the police. To-night we have more important business to settle."

"What business?" asked Luigi Malatesta, with terrible agitation.

"The machinery of justice must be set at work," replied Father Durcel, quietly; "the murderer of this girl must be found."

Luigi Malatesta suffered an agony of fear. What if his brother had not fled? What if he should return, and fall into the very arms of the avenger of guilt?

He advanced towards the door, and was about to open it, in order that, should Joseph Maldon by any fatal chance return, he might hear their voices as he ascended the staircase, and take warning in time.

Emmanuel Durcel, the Jesuit, interrupted him.

"Remain where you are, Signor Malatesta," he said, in quiet but authoritative tones; "do not stir; and, above all, do not open that door. The porter says that this Monsieur Lancy will return to this house; but the porter is mistaken. Monsieur Lancy will never re-enter this room unless he is brought here by the officers of justice."

"You think, then—" gasped Luigi Malatesta.

"I think that he was by some means or other made aware of your intended visit to me, and that he therefore administered a double dose to his unhappy victim, in order to defeat the help which I might have rendered her. He then fled, taking with him everything of value which he possessed. The bare aspect of the apartment alone reveals that. It has no sign of human habitation."

Luigi Malatesta glanced round the room. He saw that Father Durcel had indeed spoken the truth. The phials and chemical apparatus which he had observed a couple of hours before had disappeared.

Joseph had, therefore, fled.

The Florentine breathed more freely.

"Tell me, Signor Malatesta," said the priest, laying his hand upon the

lock of the door as he addressed Luigi, "you know this Monsieur Lancy,—do you not?"

"I am slightly acquainted with him," answered Luigi, with visible embarrassment.

"Only slightly acquainted."

"No more," replied the Florentine, shunning the clear and penetrating gaze of the benevolent old man.

"He is a Frenchman, I suppose?" said Father Dureel.

"I believe so."

Luigi Malatesta wished by every means in his power to shield his brother from detection. He did not hesitate, therefore, to utter this falsehood.

"Can you tell me what he is?" asked the priest.

"No; I am utterly ignorant of the man's calling. I formed a casual acquaintance with him the other morning in the gardens of the Luxembourg, and hearing that I was a little skilled in the science of medicine,—he—he—asked me to call here and see his sick wife."

Emmanuel Dureel's searching glance never wandered from the face of the speaker. He did not believe in this improbable story.

"Strange!" he said, gravely; "very strange, that a man who was poisoning his wife should call in a chance acquaintance, skilled in medicine, to see her."

"He may have wished to *appear* to consult a physician without incurring the risk of employing a really skilful man," answered Luigi Malatesta; "he may have trusted to the ignorance of an amateur in the science as a safeguard against discovery."

"*He may*," replied Father Durcel, with an accent which expressed anything but belief; "yet still his conduct appears strange. Why did you suspect that poison had been administered?"

"From the appearance of the patient."

"And for no other reason?" asked the priest.

"For no other."

"Enough," said Father Durcel; "we will waste no more time in this conversation. I sought to obtain a clue to the discovery of this man, but you have afforded me very little information. Time is precious; come with me."

"Whither?" asked Luigi Malatesta, following the Jesuit down the staircase, for he dared not disobey his superior in the wonderful order to which he belonged.

"To Victor Canlot, the chief of the criminal police of Paris," answered Emmanuel Durcel.

Luigi Malatesta shuddered. He knew the marvellous genius of this celebrated detector of crime. He knew that the wariest and most determined criminals had been tracked to their doom by this man.

"Unless Giuseppe is already on his way to England he is lost," thought the Florentine.

The criminal laws of France are not so merciful as those of England. The law of France can seize upon half a dozen innocent people who may happen to be suspected—no matter on what slight grounds—of some one crime. Its iron hand can detain these people, while the officers of the police, like a pack of bloodhounds, track out the traces of the guilty mystery. The law of France is a terrible and all-powerful engine, which conducts the criminal to the avenging knife of the guillotine.

Before leaving the house, Father Durcel paused and addressed the porter, who was sitting half asleep upon a stool near the door.

"Madame Lancy, the sick person upon the fourth story, is dead," he said, gravely. "See that the apartment is watched, and that no one enters it until I return."

"Dead!" exclaimed the old man. "Ah, poor lady!—ah, poor, unhappy lady! I thought that she would not last long. But this death is very sudden, is it not, monsieur?" he added, looking from the priest to the Florentine. "I scarcely know whether I am justified in permitting you to leave the house until the husband of the poor lady returns."

"I am Emmanuel Durcel, of the College of Jesuits," said the priest. "You have heard of me, no doubt?"

The porter bowed to the ground,

clasping his hands in an outburst of enthusiasm.

"Heard of you? Oh, yes, indeed, monseigneur," he exclaimed; "who has not heard of you, and of your good works? Your name is as familiar to us as the names of the saints, and almost as holy. Pray forgive me, monseigneur, that I should —"

"No more, my good friend," said the priest, kindly. "I forgive you freely, — indeed, I have nothing to forgive. You were perfectly justified in your precaution. Come, Signor Malatesta."

Father Durcel, or Monseigneur Durcel, as he was more commonly called, left the house, followed by Luigi Malatesta.

It was now long past one o'clock; the city was quiet, save in those quarters in which the noisy and dissipated still kept up their Carnival revels.

Philip Howland had waited beneath the doorway of the opposite house for the reappearance of Luigi Malatesta and the priest.

The footman was exhausted and weary, but he was not a man to be easily beaten. He was determined to follow Luigi Malatesta wherever he went. Perhaps in simple obedience to the commands of the duchess; perhaps for some more deeply rooted motive.

Father Durcel and the Florentine crossed one of the bridges which connect the old city of Paris with the opposite shore upon which the palace of the Louvre proudly towers. They traversed the Rue Rivoli, and entered the Rue St. Honoré. They turned out of this street into one of the quieter and more lonely thoroughfares, still followed by Philip Howland, who was unobserved by either of them; for, in the terror and agitation which he had undergone, Luigi Malatesta had forgotten the circumstance of the mysterious stranger who had followed him into the house in the Rue Gueneville.

The street which Father Durcel and the Florentine entered was narrow and unfrequented, but the houses were massive and handsome. One of these houses was considerably larger than the rest, and stood in a square courtyard. The house, forming three sides of a quadrangle, surrounded this courtyard, except upon the side facing the street, which was shut in by iron railings.

The massive iron gate was ajar, and fell back upon its hinges as Father Durcel pushed it. In the lower windows of this large, but rather gloomy-looking mansion, lights were burning, late though the hour was.

But it was no Carnival festivity which kept the inhabitants of this house awake in the dead hours that follow midnight.

This mansion was the chief office of the criminal police.

It was here that Victor Canlot, the head of that wonderful force, was always to be found, — always wakeful, always ready, always intelligent.

Father Durcel opened one of the smaller doors communicating with the house, and entered an office in which several clerks were at work.

"Monsieur Canlot is here?" he asked.

"He is, monsieur," answered one of the clerks, without looking up from his desk.

"Can I see him?"

"Impossible, monsieur."

"But I have something of importance to communicate. A crime has been committed, and —"

"You will be pleased to communicate the particulars to me, monsieur. I will submit them to our chief."

The Jesuit smiled. Luigi Malatesta breathed more freely. He felt that there would probably be considerable delay before the chief of police could become acquainted with the dark deed that had been done.

But he was mistaken.

"I do not think that Monsieur Canlot will refuse to see me when he hears my name," said the priest. "Will you tell him that Emmanuel Durcel, of the College of Jesuits, wishes to speak with him?"

That name seemed to act as a spell upon the busy official. He rose and bowed respectfully to the priest.

"Pardon me, monseigneur," he said; "I have not the honor of personally

knowing you. Monsieur Canlot will no doubt see you without delay. Will you be pleased to accompany me to his room?"

The clerk opened a door communicating with a long corridor, through which he walked, followed by Father Durcel and Luigi Malatesta.

Late as it was, busy men, with grave faces and preoccupied manner, were hurrying backwards and forwards along this corridor. Doors were opened and shut, and the low hum of voices sounded in every direction.

The terrible machinery of justice knows no rest. The avenger never slumbers. Even while the criminal sleeps the broken and restless sleep of guilt, the engines of discovery and detection are at work; the bloodhounds of the law are upon his track.

From the fatal moment in which his crime is committed the guilty man becomes a slave. His chains are forged by his own deed, by his own free will; and they bind him until the hour in which he pays the penalty of his crime, and is released by an ignominious death.

The room into which the official ushered Father Durcel and Luigi Malatesta was a large apartment, plainly furnished, but brilliantly lighted. Victor Canlot, the chief of the criminal police, was seated at a table covered with papers, and surrounded by five plainly dressed men, who were listening with silent attention to the orders of their master.

Upon the right hand of the chief stood a cabinet, lighted by two lamps.

The chief of police immediately recognized Father Durcel.

"Be seated, I beg, monseigneur," he said, "and you, too, monsieur," he added, turning to Luigi Malatesta; "I will attend to you immediately. Gentlemen, you may go."

The five men bowed, and retired from the apartment. The priest and the Florentine were alone with the chief of police.

"Now, monseigneur," he said, "in what manner can I serve you?"

"I have reason to believe, monsieur," replied the Jesuit, "that a murder has been committed in the Rue Gueneville. A woman has died under very peculiar circumstances, and, I suspect, from communications made to me by this gentleman, Signor Malatesta, and from observations made by myself, that this unhappy woman has been poisoned by her husband."

"Enough, monsieur," answered Victor Canlot, quietly. "The first step is to arrest the supposed murderer. We can ascertain afterwards whether he be guilty or innocent. What is his name?"

"Lancy."

"His Christian name?"

This time it was Luigi Malatesta who answered.

"I do not know," he said.

"The man is a Frenchman, I suppose?" said Monsieur Canlot.

"He is," answered Luigi.

"A Frenchman. His name Lancy. His appearance?"

The Florentine hesitated for a few moments before he replied.

He felt that he had here an opportunity of favoring his brother's escape.

"This Lancy is fair and stout," he said, "with light blue eyes and auburn hair."

"Enough," replied the chief, wheeling round his arm-chair, and opening the cabinet at his side.

This cabinet was no ordinary piece of furniture. A sharp, clicking noise sounded as the police officer bent over it, and Father Durcel and his companion could see by the motion of Monsieur Canlot's arms that he was very busy.

The cabinet was a telegraphic instrument.

The chief pushed back his arm-chair, after closing the doors of the cabinet.

"I have communicated with every railway station in Paris," he said; "and this man will be arrested if he attempts to leave the capital."

Luigi Malatesta's heart sank within him.

"He is a Frenchman," continued Monsieur Canlot; "he cannot therefore leave Paris without a passport. Had he been an Englishman, he might have escaped us."

Luigi hoped once more. His brother had represented himself as a French-

man while in Paris; but in flying from that city he would most likely reassume his English name, which, as we are aware, was also a false one.

It was so. While Victor Canlot's emissaries began their work, and search was made for the man called Lancy, Joseph Maldon waited, in one of the most obscure coffee-houses of Paris, for the hour at which the mail train left the northern station for Calais.

The mail left at seven o'clock in the morning, and at that hour the murderer escaped, thanks to the false description given of him by his brother Luigi Malatesta.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A NEW TERROR.

It was four o'clock in the morning when Luigi Malatesta and Emmanuel Durcel parted after their interview with the chief of police.

It was half-past four when the Florentine entered the house in the Champs Elysées.

He was admitted by the sleepy porter, who yawned in his face. The lamps were burning dimly upon the staircase leading to the duke's apartments.

"So," thought Luigi Malatesta, "her Grace's servants are watching for me; I will make it my business to ascertain who it was that played the spy upon my actions."

He entered the ante-chamber. All was quiet, but he heard the steady breathing of a man. That man was Philip Howland, who lay upon the cushioned bench, to all appearance fast asleep. He opened his eyes and looked about him with a half-stupefied gaze, as the Florentine entered the apartment. Then, rising hastily, he apologized for his stupidity.

"Pardon me, monsieur," he said; "I was so fast asleep that I did not hear your footstep."

The Florentine looked with a scrutinizing gaze at the face of the speaker.

That calm and stolid face revealed no secrets. Those eyes, which had that peculiar look which we have before described, that look which is rarely seen save in the eyes of the blind, told nothing. The countenance of the footman was a blank.

"Have you been in this apartment all the evening?" asked Luigi.

"Yes, monsieur," replied the footman, "I have been waiting for your return."

"And have none of your fellow-servants been out?"

"No, monsieur. But why do you inquire?"

"I thought I recognized the duke's livery in the street a few hours ago."

"You must have been mistaken, monsieur."

"Perhaps so," said the Florentine, as he quitted the ante-chamber, on his way to his own apartment.

Early the next morning, Philip Howland entered the duchess's boudoir, carrying a magnificent bouquet upon a silver salver.

This bouquet had not been ordered by the duchess; it was simply the footman's pretext for reaching the presence of his mistress.

The slaves of rank and fashion lead so ceremonious and artificial an existence, that, in the perpetual comedy of their life, all men and women are actors; every word, every look, every tone, every smile, is as studied as the tones, the looks, the words, the smiles, of a celebrated actor in a stage play.

The duchess was seated at her elegant breakfast-table. She was alone, for the duke had left her earlier than usual, in order to attend to some letters of importance.

"Well?" she murmured, inquiringly, as she raised her eyes, and met the expressionless orbs of the footman, — "well, Philip?"

"Your Grace has been obeyed," replied the man, carefully closing the door behind him, and placing the hot-house flowers upon the table by the duchess.

"You followed this Luigi Malatesta?"

"Yes, madam; I was employed for six hours, — from ten o'clock last night until four o'clock this morning."

"And you traced the Italian?"

"To the office of Victor Canlot, the chief of the criminal police of Paris," answered the footman, coldly.

The Duchess of Arlington uttered a faint shriek, a repressed wail of pain and terror.

"To the chief of police!" she gasped. "Then we are betrayed!"

"I trust not, madam," answered the footman.

"They have discovered all, and I am lost!" cried the duchess, not heeding Philip Howland's words.

"Nay, madam," remonstrated the man, "that is scarcely possible. There are only three persons who *know* the truth. Others may suspect, but they can only suspect. There are but three who know all. Those three are yourself, myself, and Gambia, the Indian. *You* will not betray the secret, and I am not likely to do so, since there are none who could bribe me higher than you have already bribed me."

"But Gambia, this Indian?" murmured the wretched woman.

"For him I cannot answer," replied Philip Howland. "I do not *think* that he will betray you, since in betraying you he must criminate himself."

"But this visit to the police—"

"Is very strange, to say the least of it," answered the footman. "It was important business upon which Signor Malatesta visited the office, for I ascertained from one of the officials that he had been at once admitted to the presence of Monsieur Canlot, the chief."

"Canlot!" exclaimed the duchess, wildly,—"Victor Canlot, that celebrated man, from whom no criminal ever yet escaped? Then I am indeed a doomed wretch!"

The terrified woman flung her rounded, alabaster arms above her beautiful head with a gesture of ungovernable despair.

"I am lost!" she cried,—"I am lost!"

She rose from her seat, and paced rapidly up and down the splendid apartment. All the cool determination, all that wonderful presence of mind which had made her seem almost more than mortal in her wicked power to deceive, had now deserted her. She was stricken with sudden terror, which rendered her utterly helpless.

"What is to become of me?" she murmured, in a low, moaning voice; "what is to become of me?"

"Nay, madam," said the footman, "your Grace may be needlessly alarmed by this circumstance. The Italian's interview with Monsieur Canlot may not perhaps concern you; but in any case it would be wise to leave Paris."

"Leave Paris!" exclaimed Blanche Mortimer; "yes, I will leave to-day, within an hour, if possible!"

The duke entered as she was speaking. He started upon seeing her altered face, her agitated manner.

"What has happened, dearest?" he asked, eagerly.

The duchess paused for a moment; but in that moment she recovered her presence of mind.

"I have just received a telegram from England," she said. "My father is ill. I must go to him to-day, immediately, by the first train which leaves Paris for the coast. You will aid me, will you not, dearest Gerald? You will aid me to leave France without delay?"

"Of course, my beloved," replied the duke. "What is there in which I would not aid you? But show me this telegram; let me see what message the earl has sent."

Embarrassing as this request was, Blanche Mortimer was not taken off her guard.

"In my agitation at receiving this bad news, I was so silly as to fling the telegram into the fire," she said. "I did not know what I was doing."

Philip Howland had glided noiselessly and respectfully from the room upon the entrance of the duke.

"No matter, dearest," answered Gerald Mortimer, with that tender gentleness with which he always addressed his beautiful wife; "it was only natural that you should be agitated at receiving such intelligence. We will leave Paris by the mail that starts at eleven o'clock."

As he said this, the door was opened suddenly, and Theobald Mortimer appeared upon the threshold.

The Duke of Arlington drew back with a gesture of unmitigated astonishment. He gazed with a feeling almost akin to terror, at the change in his nephew's appearance.

The young man was as pale as death, and a hollow and unnatural lustre burned in his eyes.

"Theobald!" exclaimed the duke. "how terribly pale you are! What in Heaven's name has happened?"

"Nothing of any great importance, my dear uncle," replied Theobald Mortimer, in a faint and unsteady voice. "I have passed a sleepless night, and fear that I am about to be seriously ill. I wish, therefore to return to Arlington Woods immediately."

"Very strange!" returned the duke. "The duchess and I are just about to travel to England; you shall go with us."

"With you!" exclaimed the young man, with an accent of alarm; "no—no! I—I—had rather go alone."

"You would go alone, Theobald?" said the duke. "Why would you do so?"

The nobleman's nephew was silent for some moments; then, taking Gerald Mortimer's hand in his own, he exclaimed, passionately:—

"O my benefactor, my kind and generous friend! Heaven forbid that you should ever feel such despair as that which I now endure!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LOVE AND DUTY.

While the Duke and Duchess of Arlington and their nephew, Theobald Mortimer, had been absorbed in the pleasures and dissipations of the brilliant French capital, Lady Augusta and her daughter Adela had remained at Arlington Woods, in the quiet seclusion of the country.

The young girl had been very lonely in the absence of her Cousin Theobald. They had been brought up together, they had been playfellows in childhood, and companions in youth, and this was almost their first separation.

For the first week or two of the young man's absence, Adela had been consoled by his long letters, containing animated descriptions of the pleasures of Paris, and repeated assurances of his undying affection.

But these letters became less frequent; they grew briefer and colder, and Adela felt, with bitter and terrible anguish, that there was a change in her cousin's feeling towards herself.

She could not account for that change, nor could she describe it. She uttered no complaint; she went very quietly about her daily avocations; she was gentle, affectionate, and obedient to her mother, whom she devotedly loved; but her cheek grew paler; the sunny light of her smile gradually faded away; the joyous music of her ringing laugh was no longer heard in the spacious mansion; and it was not difficult for a parent's anxious eye to discover that some secret grief was gnawing at the heart of the young girl.

But Lady Augusta was too wise to make any remark upon the subject. She knew, instinctively, that her sympathy would only be painful and embarrassing to her daughter, and she felt that silence would be the wisest course.

"My poor Adela is unhappy in her cousin's absence," she thought. "She is, perhaps, jealous of the pleasures which can keep Theobald away from her. It is only natural, and she will quickly recover her spirits when he returns."

Lady Augusta did not read the letters which Adela received from her betrothed husband. Had she done so, she, too, must have perceived the alteration in Theobald's tone; she, too, would have become aware of the change which had so suddenly come about.

Matters were in this state when a telegraphic message was received from London, to announce the immediate arrival of the Duke and Duchess of Arlington.

This intelligence threw the entire household into confusion. The duke and his bride had not been expected at Arlington Woods until after the expiration of a month or six weeks, and no preparations had been, as yet,

made for their reception. The housekeeper was therefore obliged to set to work immediately, at the head of her retinue of under-servants, in order to prepare the apartments destined for the duke and duchess.

Even Lady Augusta herself was busied in giving orders respecting the preparation, and Adela Mortimer was left alone, in the long suite of drawing-rooms, to amuse herself as best she might, until the arrival of the expected guests.

The young girl sat in the inner drawing-room, an oak-panelled chamber, furnished in the olden style. A large bay-window opened from this apartment on to the broad lawn and park before the house. Adela sat in the deep embrasure of the bay-window. Her embroidery frame was before her; a heap of books were scattered upon the ottoman at her feet; but she neither worked nor read. It was in vain that she endeavored to employ herself; it was in vain that she strove to find some distraction from her gloomy thoughts. The bright and beloved image of the past arose before her. The recollection of past days of happiness only made the sorrows of the present more bitter.

"How happy we had always been together!" she thought; "and yet, now that we are parted for the first time, he feels no sorrow for our separation. His letters are cold and formal; they are written at long intervals, and there is that in them that tells me, only too plainly, that they have been written with a painful effect. O Theobald, Theobald! what is it that has changed you?"

The telegram, which had announced the immediate arrival of the duke and duchess, had contained no mention of Theobald Mortimer's name. Adela imagined, therefore, that her cousin was still in Paris.

"He prefers remaining away from us," she thought; "he is happier in that strange capital than in his quiet country home. Ah! he would not be so if he still loved me, for we are never happy when separated from those we truly love. A paradise has no charm, a palace no splendor, that can atone for the absence of affection. Some stranger must have usurped the place which I once held in his heart; some happier and perhaps more beautiful woman must have robbed me of his love."

The young girl leant her elbow on the broad sill of the open window, and rested her head upon her hand. She did not weep. The sad oppression that weighed upon her heart was too painful for tears. Tears would have been a relief to her overcharged breast, but they would not come.

Suddenly a light hand was laid upon her shoulder, a well-known voice murmured her name. She turned pale and trembling with emotion, and found herself face to face with her Cousin Theobald.

She uttered a loud cry of joy, an outburst of surprise and delight which she could not repress.

Theobald Mortimer had come into Kent by an earlier train than that by which the duke and duchess were to travel. He had driven over from the station to Arlington Woods in a hired vehicle, which he had dismissed at the Lodge gates, and he had walked up to the house.

He had approached the open bay-window at which he had perceived his cousin's form, and his footstep had been unheard upon the velvet turf of the lawn.

In that first cry of joy, Adela Mortimer had thought only of her cousin's return. He was with her once more, and it seemed as if, in his presence, all unhappiness must be at an end. But a second glance at his face produced a sudden change of feeling in the young girl's heart, for that second glance told her that her betrothed husband had much altered during his brief absence from Arlington Woods.

He was pale and haggard, and had the aspect of one whose nights were sleepless, and whose days were disturbed by care or remorse. His was not the appearance of a man who had been devoted to pleasure, or who had abandoned himself to the selfish enjoyment of his own happiness. There was that in his countenance which Adela could not fathom, and she gazed upon him with mingled bewilderment and

regret. He entered the drawing-room, and clasped his cousin to his breast.

"My Adela!" he murmured, in a low, mournful tone; "thank Heaven, I am with you once more!"

"You love me still, then, Theobald?" said the young girl; "you have not forgotten me?"

"Forgotten you!" answered her cousin; "no, dearest, I still love you dearly and truly."

Theobald Mortimer spoke the truth. He did love his cousin, but it was with the calm affection which a brother might have had for a very dear sister. His feelings towards his betrothed wife were entirely devoid of the enthusiasm of a lover, or the boundless devotion of a husband.

"But how is it that you are here before my uncle and his wife?" asked Adela, after a pause.

"Here before them!" exclaimed the young man; "the duke and duchess are not coming to Arlington Woods."

"Not coming, Theobald!" returned Adela; "there you are mistaken. We received a telegram about an hour ago, which announced the immediate arrival of the duke and duchess."

Theobald Mortimer started, and grew even paler then he had been before.

"I parted with my Uncle Gerald at Dover," he said. "I understood that Lord Templeton was seriously ill, and that the duchess would remain in London for some time to attend upon her father."

Before Adela could reply, the cousins were startled by the sounds of carriage-wheels and the rattle of hoofs upon the broad, gravelled platform before the principal entrance of the mansion.

A carriage and four, attended by a couple of outriders, had brought the duke and duchess from the station.

Gerald Mortimer alighted, and assisted his beautiful bride to descend from the carriage. He entered the great hall, which was filled with the servants who had gathered together to welcome their old master. His lovely bride was leaning upon his arm, looking peerlessly beautiful in her costly and elegant travelling-dress.

Lady Augusta entered the hall to receive her brother-in-law and his wife. Blanche Montimer responded to her sister-in-law's cordial greetings with her most fascinating and bewitching manner. Lady Augusta conducted her guests to the drawing-room, in which Adela and Theobald had met.

It was impossible to imagine any contrast more striking than that presented by Adela and the duchess. The dazzling beauty of Blanche Mortimer far outshone the simple loveliness of her husband's niece. In elegance, in grace, in fashion, the duchess was in every way Adela's superior.

Theobald Mortimer glanced furtively from one to the other.

"Heaven help me!" he inwardly ejaculated. "I thought that I had escaped from the influence of this woman's fatal beauty. I thought that I had returned to honor and to Adela; and once more she is by my side, once more the radiance of her loveliness dazzles and bewilders me."

The duchess seated herself by Adela's side upon a luxurious sofa near the wide, open hearth, upon which burned large logs of wood, supported by dogs of glittering steel.

"We must be friends, my dear Adela," said Blanche, in that low voice, whose every tone was music; "we must be friends from this day; sisters, if you will."

She stretched out her jewelled hand, and clasped that of the young girl. Adela gazed upon the beautiful face before her with an admiration which she could not conceal.

"What exquisite loveliness!" she thought. "Who can wonder that my Uncle Gerald was bewitched by such grace and beauty, such innocence and amiability!"

Adela had been too much engrossed by the duchess, who had absorbed all her attention, to remark the agitation of her cousin's manner. Theobald Mortimer, after the first greetings had been exchanged between himself and the new-comers, had retired to a distant part of the room, where he sat, apart from the rest, silent and reserved.

The Duke of Arlington was the first to notice his nephew's manner.

"What is the matter with you, my

dear Theobald?" asked the generous-hearted nobleman. "What is it that keeps you so silent?"

The young man started, and looked up with a half-bewildered gaze at his questioner.

"I — I — was surprised by your arrival, my dear uncle," he said. "I thought that you would have remained in London. I hope, however, that you found Lord Templeton better."

"Better!" exclaimed the duke; "we actually found that he had not been ill. The telegram which so alarmed my poor Blanche must have been sent by some malicious person for the wicked purpose of terrifying her. We found the earl in perfect health, and nothing could have exceeded his astonishment when he heard the cause of our sudden return. His old enemy, the gout, had been more than usually merciful; he was in excellent health and spirits, and was about starting for Paris, where he meant to have paid us a visit. Finding this the case, I decided on bringing the duchess here at once, as I knew she would be welcome."

"And pray what have you done with your friend Signor Malatesta?" asked the duchess, rising from her seat, and walking towards Theobald and the duke. "I expected to see him here."

"He is here, your Grace," answered Theobald, quietly. "He came down with me, but retired to his own apartments as soon as we came in."

The Duchess of Arlington bit her lip as she turned away from the young man. She had hoped that the Italian would have been absent from Arlington Woods.

Dinner was announced at half-past seven o'clock, and Luigi Malatesta appeared as the family party were about leaving the drawing-room.

He sat between Lady Augusta and Theobald Mortimer, and at some distance from the duchess; but his dark eyes wandered every now and then to her beautiful face, and his upper lip trembled with that convulsive movement which was peculiar to him in moments of intense agitation.

Theobald Mortimer was very silent. He sat next his Cousin Adela, and, although he addressed her occasionally, it was evident that it was with an effort that he did so, and it was also evident that he scarcely heard or heeded her conversation.

But the poor girl was happy. Her betrothed husband was once more by her side; he was restored to her, and he had told her that he still loved her. What more could she ask from an all-bountiful Providence?

She was too pure, too innocent, too truthful, to dream of deception in others. He had told her that he loved her, and she had believed him.

She watched his pale face with an anxious gaze, for she saw that he was suffering; but she thought that his health might have been injured by the late hours and dissipation of a Parisian life.

Later in the evening, the family party were assembled in one of the large drawing-rooms. Blanche Mortimer was seated at the piano, with Adela and Lady Augusta near her, entranced by her brilliant playing, and her clear and exquisitely cultivated voice. Luigi Malatesta sat at a little distance from the instrument, absorbed in thought. He was thinking of his brother Giuseppe. He had seen Father Durcel before leaving Paris, and the Jesuit had promised to write to him, informing him of any discovery which might be made by Victor Canlot's agents, upon the subject of the murder in the Rue Gueneville. He had as yet received no tidings, and he began to hope that his brother had indeed escaped.

The wily Florentine, even amid his own anxieties, kept a careful watch upon the movements of every member of the family with whom he lived.

The ambitious game which he played was a difficult and a dangerous one, and he felt that his success depended upon his watchfulness.

The Duke of Arlington had been utterly bewildered by the change in his nephew's manner. He felt convinced that some secret grief had disturbed the young man's mind; but he could conjecture no cause for that grief, and he resolved to atttempt to obtain the confidence of Theobald

Mortimer, and by that means fathom the mystery. While the duchess was seated at the piano, Gerald Mortimer approached his nephew, who sat at a considerable distance from the rest of the party, and appeared to pay no attention to the fair songstress. But it was not so; every tone of that melodious voice seemed to penetrate to the heart of the infatuated young man. He remembered the phantom-like form which he had beheld at the Parisian opera-house; he remembered the solemn tones of the warning voice which had uttered a mysterious and horrible accusation against his uncle's wife, and he was bewildered; he knew not what to think. He felt that a dark cloud of mystery enveloped this lovely woman, and he trembled for the future peace of his generous uncle.

Gerald Mortimer approached his nephew, and, bending over him, addressed him in a low voice.

"I want to have a few minutes' conversation with you, Theobald," he said; "will you come with me into the next room?"

The young man started at the sound of that voice, and arose to obey his uncle almost mechanically.

The inner drawing-room was dimly lighted by wax candles, in branches of exquisitely chiselled silver.

The duke leaned against the broad marble mantel-piece; Theobald Mortimer stood at a few paces from his uncle, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, embarrassed, and ill at ease.

"I have wished to speak to you, Theobald," said the duke, "because I wish to discover the cause of the change which I have beheld in you during the last few weeks."

"A change!" exclaimed the young man.

"Yes, Theobald, a change that tells of secret sorrow, of hidden grief that preys upon your heart, and finds no relief in words. Why not confide in me? I have always looked upon you as a son, and I appeal to you now as a father should appeal to his son. Theobald, will you refuse to trust me?"

"No, my dear uncle," answered the young man, suddenly, while a crimson blush glowed upon the face which before had been as pale as marble. "I will not refuse to trust you, and I will not betray the confidence which you have placed in me. I will freely own that I have been unhappy, very, very unhappy; but there are some griefs against which it is a man's duty to struggle; there are some sorrows to which it is worse than cowardice to give way. I will make that struggle which an honorable man should make, and I will implore you to aid me in it. You will not refuse to do so?"

"Refuse to do so?" cried the duke; "no, indeed, Theobald. Tell me what you would have me do, and it shall be done."

"I will be frank, sir," answered Theobald. "You are the guardian of my Cousin Adela, as well as of myself."

"I am."

"A short time ago, we confided to you our mutual attachment, and you declared your approbation."

"I did, my dear Theobald," returned the duke.

"But you begged us to defer our union until we both should have seen more of the world."

"Yes; I considered it only wise to do so."

"Will you withdraw that condition, my dear uncle? If I can win my Cousin Adela's consent to our speedy marriage, will you also grant yours?"

"But why seek for a speedy marriage?" asked the duke.

"Oh, do not ask me, sir!" cried Theobald, passionately; "do not stand between me and the performance of a sacred duty."

"A duty!" repeated Gerald Mortimer. "Ah, Theobald, I now understand all. You have ceased to love your cousin."

"Ceased to love her! No, no, my dear uncle, I still think her the best and most amiable of women; but—"

"But you love another," interrupted the duke. "Ah, my dear boy, do not trifle with affection! It is too sacred, too sublime a sentiment. To pledge your faith to one woman, while your heart is given to another, is to utter the most horrible of perjuries. Better that Adela should feel the grief of your

desertion, than accept a husband who could not offer her an entire heart."

"Oh, do not refuse to hear me, my dear uncle!" cried Theobald. "I tell you that my only hope of happiness is in an immediate union with Adela. Her love, her truth, her purity, will win me from the guilty love which has crept into my heart."

"Guilty love!" echoed the duke; "what do you mean?"

"I mean that there is a guilt in love which can never be returned. The woman whom I love can never be mine; she must never know of my love."

"Stay!" exclaimed Gerald Mortimer; "who is this woman?"

"Her name is sacred, sir," answered Theobald, gravely; "it would be dishonor to betray it. My duty to my cousin is a dear and sacred one. Once her husband, it would be worse than sin to cherish the image of another. Let me call her my wife. I will pluck that fatal image from my heart, and you shall see that I will not fail in the devotion due to my bride."

"Be it so, then, Theobald," said the duke. "I cannot resist your appeal. Heaven grant that I may be wise in granting this request."

He grasped his nephew's hand and left him. As he was crossing the threshold of the door he paused, and once more addressed Theobald.

"Let the marriage take place immediately," he said, "if you can win Adela's consent. I will give the bride away."

It was nearly midnight when the family retired to rest. Theobald Mortimer's apartments were next to those occupied by Luigi Malatesta, and the young man paused at the door of the Florentine's bed-chamber to wish him good-night.

"You were very much engaged with your Cousin Adela," said Luigi, fixing a penetrating glance upon his pupil's face; "you must have found some very interesting topic for conversation."

"Yes, a most interesting one," answered Theobald; "I was persuading my cousin to fix upon our wedding day."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Florentine; "and did she consent to do so?"

"She did. We are to be married in less than a month."

The Italian started, and a dark frown contracted his eyebrows; but it was quickly exchanged for a smile,—a smile that had a sardonic meaning.

"Strange!" he said. "I was mistaken, then."

"Mistaken in what?" asked Theobald.

"I thought that you loved another."

"Luigi Malatesta," answered the young man, gravely, "you have been the instructor, the friend, and confidant of my youth. It is not, therefore, strange if you are able to penetrate the dearest secrets of my heart. But remember that which your own religion teaches,—the duty of sacrifice. There is something yet more sacred than affection, more precious than love,—and that something is honor."

He shook hands with the Florentine, and the two men retired to their separate apartments.

"So," exclaimed the Jesuit, as he closed the door of his lonely chamber, "he would marry; he would found a race who shall inherit the hoarded wealth of centuries; but it shall not be so. If he weds, his union shall be accursed; for his destiny is written here—here," exclaimed the Italian, striking his forehead, "in the brain of Luigi Malatesta. Gerald and Theobald Mortimer shall die childless; and the wealth of the House of Arlington shall swell the coffers of the church."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE GREEN-ROOM SUPPER.

Let us turn from the luxurious country-seat of the Duke of Arlington to one of the most obscure neighborhoods in the city of London. Let us enter a small attic in a house in Monk Street, Blackfriars. The room is small, but it is comfortably furnished, though the articles of furniture are of the commonest description. But there is cleanliness and comfort in the aspect of the humble chamber. The fire burns brightly; the

tea-things are laid upon the little round table, which is covered with a cloth of snowy whiteness. A joint of cold roast beef, a pewter pot, and a bottle of pickles also adorn this table, at which Mr. John Primmins, the Cheap Jack, is seated, with a large knife and fork in his hands.

Aurora, the lovely show-girl, sits opposite to him, dressed in a simple gown of some common brown stuff, and with her superb golden hair rolled in a coronet of plaits round her exquisitely shaped head.

"Now, father," she said, gayly, as Mr. Primmins laid down his knife and fork in order to take a long draught from the pewter pot; "now, my dear father, let me see you eat a good dinner before I go away."

"Or else you won't go away easy in your mind!" exclaimed the Cheap Jack; "that's about it, aint it, my little dear? Bless your tender heart, if you didn't see father stuff himself like hany hold halligator, you wouldn't go away happy in your mind to perform the Beautiful Princess in the great drammer at the Brunswick Theayter, and to captivate the hearts of heverybody as sees yer."

"Yes, father, only think how lucky I was to get such an engagement!" exclaimed Aurora, gayly.

"Lucky, my dear! I should think so. Five-and-twenty shillings a week, and to be rose in a twelvemonth! Its wonderful! No paradin' out o' doors in wet weather, and all your beautiful dresses found for you! It's magnificent!"

A change had taken place in the fortunes of Cheap Jack and his adopted daughter. The manager of one of the theatres on the Surrey side of the water had seen Aurora at a country fair, and, struck by the beauty and intelligence of the young girl, had offered her a salary of five-and-twenty shillings a week, which Mr. John Primmins thought a superb income. The Cheap Jack had therefore established himself in Monk Street, Blackfriars, where he had taken three rooms for himself and his favorite.

The manager of the Brunswick Theatre had chosen the young actress chiefly on account of that marvellous and brilliant beauty which had made her the flower of Mrs. Flipson's travelling troupe. The Brunswick Theatre was much frequented by the gay and dissipated members of the aristocracy and the wealthy classes; and Mr. Harcourt Spalding, the manager, had won for himself considerable celebrity by the bevy of lovely girls whom he had collected together.

The night of which we now write was the night selected for the manager's benefit; and, as the season had been a remarkably successful one, Mr. Spalding had announced his intention of giving a champagne supper to his company and a few of the most aristocratic green-room loungers, after the performance.

This supper was looked forward to as a most brilliant event by all the company, but most especially by Aurora, the simple girl, who had seen no life beyond the rustic existence she had led with her adopted father.

John Primmins had arranged with his young charge that he should come to the theatre when his evening's work was over and wait to escort her home.

The house was crowded in honor of Mr. Harcourt Spalding, and the performances went off with unusual brilliancy. The curtain fell at a late hour upon the last piece, and the company adjourned to the green-room, where the supper-table was arranged with great splendor.

The actors and actresses wore the dresses in which they had performed. The loungers of the green-room wore simple evening costume.

Among these loungers was one man who was almost unknown in the world of rank and fashion, although of a good old family, and possessed of a superb fortune.

This man was Sir Marmaduke Oswald.

He had inherited his fortune from an elder brother, who had died many years before the period of which we write.

Sir Marmaduke was a man of about forty years of age. He was silent and reserved; his manners rather disagreeable from their extreme hauteur. His figure was commanding, and his face handsome.

Among the stars of the Brunswick Theatre was a young girl called Laura Spagnolletta. She sang and danced

with equal perfection; her acting was bewitching, her appearance captivating; but her beauty was not to be compared to that of the modest and retiring Aurora.

But it was Laura Spagnolletta who was the queen of the supper-party; and, when the toast of the evening — "The health of the ladies of the company" — was drunk, it was Laura who was called upon to respond to it.

In answer to that general appeal the young girl sprang lightly upon the supper-table.

"This is the platform from which I shall address you, ladies and gentlemen," she said. "I am so little, that in any other position I should be neither seen nor heard," she added, with a bewitching laugh.

A loud burst of applause greeted this speech.

The *danseuse* wore a *debardeur* costume. Her hair was powdered, her neck and arms bare. Her loose pantaloons were of purple silk velvet, richly embroidered with gold. The scarf that encircled her slender waist was of rose-colored satin.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she resumed, when the applause had subsided, "you have conferred a great honor upon the female members of this company, and you call upon me to acknowledge that honor. Allow me to express in the simplest terms, that you — do us proud."

She descended gracefully from her elevation, and seated herself once more among her companions and the aristocratic admirers who crowded round her, eager to win a smile or a glance.

"Mademoiselle Spagnolletta," said Sir Marmaduke Oswald, bending over the young actress, who was of French extraction, "can you tell me the name of that young girl, in the simple costume, who is standing upon the opposite side of the table?"

It was towards Aurora that the baronet looked as he asked this question.

Laura Spagnolletta was surprised at this address from the haughty Sir Marmaduke Oswald, who had rarely conversed with her.

"Do you mean the young girl with the brown eyes and the chestnut hair?" she asked, rather disdainfully, for she by no means approved of a rival upon the throne which had been awarded to her for her grace and beauty.

"Yes; she is very lovely," answered the baronet. "Can you tell me her name?"

"She is called Miss Fortescue in the play-bills," returned Mademoiselle Spagnolletta, "but I believe she calls herself Aurora. I understand that she has no proper surname."

"No surname!" exclaimed Sir Marmaduke; "what do you mean?"

"I mean that she does not know who she is. She was adopted by some wandering peddler, and has passed her life amongst the rustic performers who travel from one fair to another, amusing the country people. Mr. Spalding saw her in some travelling booth, and picked her up because of her pretty face; though, for my own part, I cannot say that I think her pretty," added Mademoiselle Spagnolletta, scornfully.

"Pretty!" cried the baronet; "she is lovely, and her face —"

He was silent for some moments, as if lost in thought.

"Her face reminds me of the face of one who was once very dear to me," he said, slowly. "Will you introduce me to her?"

He was very pale, and Mademoiselle Spagnolletta could see that he was much agitated.

"If you please," she replied, indifferently. "Come here, child," she added, calling to Aurora.

The young girl obeyed as submissively as if she had been indeed a child. She bowed gracefully in acknowledgment of the few words of compliment murmured by the baronet, when introduced to her by Laura Spagnolletta, but she was evidently embarrassed by his admiration, and she would have withdrawn hastily, when she was arrested by Sir Marmaduke.

"Pardon me, Miss Fortescue," he said, with respectful politeness, "pardon me if I address you upon a subject which may perhaps be painful; but I have just heard from Mademoiselle Spagnolletta that you are an adopted child, and that you do not even know the names of your real parents."

"It is true," murmured Aurora.

"Have you no wish to discover the secret of your birth?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" exclaimed the young girl, with suppressed fervor; "it is the dearest wish of my heart. If I could see my mother and clasp her in my arms, I think I could die happy the next moment."

"Strange!" said the baronet; "you much resemble one whom I once knew."

"Indeed!" returned Aurora, "I was once before told this."

"By whom?"

"By an Italian gentleman, who had met a lady at Rome whom he said I resembled."

"At Rome!" cried the baronet. "How long is it since he met the lady?"

"Seventeen years."

"It is the same time!" exclaimed Sir Marmaduke, "and I cannot therefore be mistaken in the likeness. That lady's name was Olivia Oswald, and she was the widow of my brother; but she never had a daughter. The likeness must therefore be an accident."

"It must be so, sir," murmured Aurora; "and yet,—"

She paused, hesitatingly, timidly.

"And yet what, child?" asked the baronet.

"I would much like to see this lady whom I resemble."

"That is impossible, my poor girl," answered Sir Marmaduke; "my sister-in-law, Lady Oswald, resides in Naples."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE RESEMBLANCE ONCE MORE.

Amongst the lodgers in the house occupied by John Primmins and his adopted daughter in Monk Street, Blackfriars, there was one who was considered of a good deal more importance than the others.

This man was called Captain Gordon. He described himself as a Portuguese. His skin was of the darkest olive, almost approaching a copper *color.* His hair was as black as night, straight and silky. His eyes were also black,—of that intense black which has a peculiar, piercing brightness that seems to flash like the sharp point of a dagger.

This Portuguese captain had occupied the parlor floor of the house in Monk Street for three years when John Primmins and his adopted child first entered into possession of the attics.

He was respected and he was feared. He was respected for his wealth, which was reported to be of considerable extent. People scarcely knew why they feared him; for his manner was mild and gentle, his voice soft and musical as that of a woman.

The fear which was felt in a greater or less degree by all who knew him was an instinctive feeling for which they could not account.

They only knew that, however softly he spoke, the sound of his voice caused a thrill of terror in those who heard it; however gentle his manner, his presence inspired dread.

He had furnished his new apartments, and he had adorned them with strange and costly articles of furniture that inspired considerable curiosity in all who entered the rooms. Indian cabinets of rare and exquisite workmanship, caskets of carved ivory, Persian carpets, Turkish pipes, Chinese lamps,—all adorned the small sitting-room and sleeping-chamber occupied by the Portuguese captain.

He described himself as the commander of a vessel trading between Portugal and England; yet during the three years which he had passed in Monk Street, Blackfriars, he had rarely been absent from home for more than a day or two at a time.

It was his custom to remain in-doors all day, sleeping upon his luxurious divan, or smoking one of his long Turkish pipes. Late in the evening he would leave the house, to which he never returned until the other lodgers had retired to rest.

No one ever heard him re-enter. He admitted himself by means of a latch-key, and his step was soft and noiseless as that of a cat.

Aurora shrank from this man with a feeling of terror which was quite unusual

to her. She had only met him once or twice in the passage into which his apartments opened, but she had felt each time as if an evil spirit had crossed her pathway.

She had mentioned this feeling to John Primmins, when speaking of the Portuguese captain.

"Well, I must say, my precious beauty," answered the honest auctioneer, "that I quite agree with you there. The Portugee is an article I shouldn't like to put up for sale, though I aint generally particular as to what I disposes of, and though in the common way of business I'd as soon sell my customers as I would my goods. But now, I really shouldn't like to offer that chap cheap to anybody, for I fancy those as bought him would find they'd got hold of an ugly customer. He's a sleek, oily-looking, handsome chap enough in his way, but he looks to me for all the world like one of them slippery, slimy boa-constrictures that they carry about in the zoölogical vans. He looks as if he could curl himself about you and crush you up small, and keep his temper pleasant all the time. He looks as if it came natural to him to be a snake, and unnatural to be a man. But, Lord bless you, my little beauty, you mustn't go for to be frightened of him, for if it came to a stand-up fight, John Primmins would pound him up into apple-sauce before you could say Jack Robinson."

Aurora had looked anxiously forward to another interview with Sir Marmaduke Oswald. She wished to question him once more about that lady who bore so marvellous a resemblance to her, yet whose daughter it was impossible she could be. She had told John Primmins of the strange circumstances which had occurred upon the night of Mr. Spalding's benefit; but her adopted father looked upon the matter in a very suspicious light.

"Don't you have nothing to say to this here baronight, Aurora," he said. "I dare say this here likeness what he talks about is all gammon. He wants to get an excuse for speaking to you, my pretty, and don't you have nothing whatever to say to him."

Aurora was very ready to obey her protector, for she loved him too dearly to dream of thwarting any wish expressed by him; yet she would gladly have once more spoken with Sir Marmaduke Oswald upon that subject which was nearest and dearest to her heart.

She could not repress that most natural yearning of a pure and innocent heart, — the yearning for a mother's love.

"I don't want to find a father, you know, dear," she would say to John Primmins, "for you have been all that the fondest father could be to me. I only want to find the mother from whom I was torn in my infancy; for I never, never can believe that any mother would willingly desert her child."

John Primmins would make no reply to this enthusiastic speech of his adopted daughter. He had his own opinions upon the subject. He thought that Aurora had been abandoned by some wicked and heartless woman, who only looked upon her child as a burden and a disgrace.

Dearly as he loved his young charge, he could not bear to think that she should ever be claimed by others who might, perhaps, rob him of her affection.

"I should like to see you a rile duchess, my little darling," he would say, "if I thought as how you'd still remember poor Jack Primmins; but I'm afraid you wouldn't; you'd order your powdered flunkeys to show poor old Jack the door, — that's what you'd do, my dear, I'm afraid."

"Not if I was Queen of England, father dear," answered Aurora. "I'd love you as dearly as I do to-day if I wore a crown to-morrow. I could never, never, never forget your goodness."

Mr. Primmins sighed. The more beautiful, the more accomplished and bewitching the nameless girl grew, the more the honest-hearted fellow feared the possibility of losing her.

Aurora looked in vain for Sir Marmaduke Oswald. Several evenings passed, and she did not see him in his accustomed box at the theatre. After waiting patiently for more than a week, the young girl ventured to make some inquiry of the brilliant Mademoiselle Spagnolletta.

"Sir Marmaduke Oswald!" exclaimed Laura, maliciously; "you wish to know what has become of your admirer, the haughty Sir Marmaduke. I am sorry to tell you that he has left London on his way to the Continent. He has gone to Italy, I believe. Powerful as was the impression made by your charms, it was not sufficiently powerful to keep the baronet in London."

"You are very unkind, Mademoiselle Spagnolletta," replied Aurora, with quiet dignity. "I had a very particular reason for making this inquiry about Sir Marmaduke Oswald."

"Oh, no doubt," answered Laura; "a very particular reason, of course!"

Upon the very night during which this conversation took place, an adventure almost more singular than the last occurred to the young girl.

Aurora left the theatre earlier than usual, and on reaching the stage door, where it was John Primmins' custom to wait for her every evening, in order to conduct her home, she found that her protector had not yet arrived. He had started almost immediately after tea with his van, on an expedition to a patch of waste ground near King's Cross, where it was his habit to hold forth to his astonished listeners upon the merits of cutlery and medicine, jewelry and hardware, musical instruments and bears' grease, and all the other articles in which he was an experienced dealer.

Aurora had expected that her adopted father would be late, and she had determined on trying to reach home before him, in order to surprise him with a comfortable supper prepared by her own hands.

She hurried away from the stage door, and walked rapidly homewards through the thoroughfare that led from the Brunswick Theatre to the Blackfriars Road.

Eleven o'clock had just struck, and the streets were growing empty. Most of the shops were closed; but here and there, through the open shutters of some windows whose owner kept later hours than his neighbors, the gas streamed out upon the dark pavement, and lighted the faces of the few passers-by.

Aurora was unaccustomed to the London streets, and she felt some slight sentiment of fear upon finding herself alone at that hour in the gloomy and dingy neighborhood which she had to traverse.

Monk Street was situated near the water's edge, upon that part of the river bank which lies between Blackfriars and London Bridges. In order to reach this obscure neighborhood, Aurora had to pass through several narrow and lonely streets. In one of these streets, or alleys — a narrow lane of tall, dilapidated houses, that led straight down to the Thames — the young girl was arrested by a man who met her face to face, and who suddenly grasped her wrist as she was hurrying past him.

Terrified beyond measure at this singular proceeding, Aurora uttered an exclamation of fear, and tried to wrench her slender wrist from the stranger's grasp.

"Let me go!" she cried; "let me go, sir, immediately!"

"No," answered the man, quietly, "not till you have told me why you are hurrying down to the river's brink at this late hour."

There was something in the grave and earnest tone of the speaker that convinced Aurora she had been mistaken. He was no ruffian. It was not for the purpose of insulting her that he had thus arrested her footsteps.

"What do you mean, sir?" she asked, respectfully.

"I ask you what *you* mean by being here at this hour?" returned the stranger. "Why do you hurry to the brink of that black and fatal river? Do you know how many have sought a resting-place beneath its turbid waters? Do you know how many young as you have pillowed their fair heads upon that cold and cruel breast?"

Aurora imagined for a moment that the stranger must be mad, but there was that in his manner which gave the lie to such a supposition. She looked at him wonderingly; and, even in the dim light of that dark and narrow street, she could perceive that he was young and handsome; that his face was as fair as a woman's; his hair a pale

golden; his eyes a soft, luminous blue. His costume was that of a member of the lowest grade of society,— a beggar or an adventurer, as the case might be. But, as he drew nearer to him in the earnestness of his address, she perceived a powerful odor of otto of roses, which seemed to emanate from the folds of his loose and ragged coat. She would have been able to recognize him anywhere by this subtle perfume.

"Listen to me, my poor girl," he said, earnestly. "I trust that I was mistaken in the fear which you inspired in my breast a few moments since. As I saw your slender figure hurrying through the darkness in the direction of that fatal tide, I believed that you were one of those unhappy creatures, who, weary of the bitter desolation of a life of vice, seek to end it even yet more sinfully beneath that cruel river. I am well known to many of the wretched ones in this vast city. I am known as the friend of the friendless, the protector of the desolate. Those who meet me recognize me by a sign which the darkness cannot hide. They recognize me by the perfume which I wear about these ragged garments, — the perfume of otto of roses."

"But," hesitated the young girl, "you, too, are poor, sir,— are you not? You need help as much as those you would befriend."

The stranger smiled.

"Do not ask that question, my poor child," he said; "those who know me by the sign of which I have spoken know neither my name nor my station. They only know that they have a friend, — a friend who will not shudder when he hears of their sin, but who will do all in his power to restore them to peace, to lead them to repentance. When I was seventeen years of age, I was told a secret, the knowledge of which has influenced every hour of my life, every thought of my mind, every impulse of my heart. That secret was the secret of my birth. In the hour of that discovery I made a vow, which I have never broken — which I never will break. I swore to become the friend of the friendless. You now know why it was that I intercepted your pathway just now. Pray forgive me. I am only too happy to have been mistaken."

"Forgive you, sir!" murmured Aurora, "how can I do otherwise than reverence and admire you for your goodness to those who need your help?"

She told him in a few words who she was, and how it had happened that she was alone upon that particular evening.

The stranger appeared singularly impressed by her story.

"A foundling!" he said, thoughtfully, — "a nameless, motherless, fatherless girl! Ah, how deep a sympathy there should be between us!"

"A sympathy between us!" repeated Aurora, wonderingly.

"Yes, child," answered the stranger, "for I too am nameless. The story of my birth is a sorrowful story. The name which I bear is not my own; the name which I *should* bear is not even known to me."

Aurora had walked towards Monk Street while conversing with the stranger. She had now reached the corner of the narrow thoroughfare which led to her destination. At this corner stood a large gin-palace,— the ruin and the temptation of the poor and miserable, the fatal shelter of the homeless.

The brilliant lights of this gaudy palace streamed through the plate-glass windows, and illuminated the shabby street. Aurora's face was concealed by a thick black veil, which was impenetrable to the stranger's gaze.

"I will detain you no longer," he said, lingering for a moment at this lighted corner of the street, "since, thank Heaven, you do not need my help. Return to your humble protector; cling to the shelter which his affection bestows upon you; but if ever fortune should lavish her golden gifts upon you, remember the miserable ones upon whom the world turns its darkest frown."

"I will, I will," murmured the young girl.

"For the sake of the mother whose name you know not, whose face you never saw, — for the sake of her whose sufferings may have been as terrible as those of the miserable ones whom you would relieve."

"Yes, yes, for my mother's sake."

"Good-night, then," said the stranger, turning from her; but he stopped suddenly, and once more addressed her.

"Stay!" he said; "there is something in your voice — a subtle and nameless music — that tells of youth and beauty. Let me see your face."

He took Aurora's hand, and drew her towards the blazing window of the gin-palace.

The young girl was entirely free from that affectation which is the very reverse of true modesty.

She lifted her veil, and the stranger gazed earnestly upon her face. But at the first glance every vestige of color faded out of his cheeks, and the exclamation which fell from his lips was almost akin to terror.

"Great Heaven!" he exclaimed, "what a marvellous resemblance!" He struck the very chord in Aurora's heart which had so lately been agitated.

"A resemblance," she repeated; "to whom?"

"To one whose name I know not," answered the stranger, mournfully; "to one who may, perhaps, have ceased to live. Those who revealed to me the secret of my birth gave me a picture. It was the miniature of my mother. I have worn it next my heart ever since that day. I know not her name. I do not know if she yet lives; but I know that even her pictured face is more to me than all the other faces upon this earth; and an insult offered to her memory provokes in me a sentiment of hatred, a thirst for revenge which no injury to myself could inspire."

"And I am like this picture?" murmured Aurora.

"Yes, yes, the likeness is miraculous."

"Strange!" exclaimed the young girl. "I have twice before been told the same thing."

"You have been told that you resemble a picture?"

"No, not a picture; a living being, — a lady who once lived in Rome, who now resides in Naples."

"What is her name?"

"Lady Oswald."

"Lady Oswald!" repeated the stranger, with a bitter laugh, "my mother can have been no titled lady, or her son would never have been torn from her arms, and sent nameless and homeless upon the cruel world. The likeness must be accidental, and my *Lady* Oswald would indeed laugh with utter scorn, if she could be told that she resembled the wronged and suffering creature who gave birth to a nameless child."

The clocks in the neighborhood had struck the midnight hour during this conversation, and Aurora suddenly remembered the terror which her affectionate protector would feel at her unusual absence.

"I must leave you," she said to the stranger, "for my adopted father will be anxious for my return; but may I ask of you," she added, hesitatingly, — "may I ask of you a favor?"

"Most decidedly."

"Will you let me see this miniature which you say resembles me?"

"I will. No one but myself has ever gazed upon it since it has been in my possession; but if you will give me your address, I will call upon you and your adopted father to-morrow, and I will show you the miniature."

"Thank you, sir, you are very kind; our address is Number Four, Monk Street. We shall expect you to-morrow. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night," answered the stranger.

Aurora hurried homewards at a rapid pace. The stranger walked slowly towards one of the dark avenues leading to the water.

"I will perform my nightly penance for my father's sin," he murmured. "*Lady* Oswald! Lady Oswald! the name haunts me, but the idea is too absurd. The likeness *must* be accidental."

He repeated the very words which Sir Marmaduke had uttered.

"The likeness must be accidental!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TERRORS OF CONSCIENCE.

LUIGI MALATESTA had been correct in his conjecture as to his brother's flight. Giuseppe, or Joseph Maldon, as he called himself, reached London

unwatched and unsuspected, while the agents and emissaries of Victor Canlot, the chief of the Parisian police, were watching the railway stations of Paris for the appearance of the big, fair Frenchman described by the Florentine.

Joseph Maldon reached England a free man. He had ridden himself of the burden which had become disagreeable to him. The cold-hearted and calculating villain had freed himself from the chains that bound him to a wife he no longer loved. He no longer loved, have I said? — he had never loved. Love is a holy and sacred sentiment, which cannot live in the heart of a bad man; it is a pure flame, which cannot exist in that poisoned charnel-house, the breast of the guilty.

Experienced as the young chemist had made himself in all those winding and intricate pathways which are familiar to the footsteps of crime; deeply skilled though he was in the power of reading the secrets of others, there was one man whose motives he could not understand, whose inmost secrets he could not read.

This man was his intended father-in-law, Andrew Burton.

The quiet and reserved merchant was a living enigma, for which Joseph Maldon could find no solution.

Andrew Burton had discovered the secret of the existence of Margaret Maldon, the wife of the man who came to North Villa as a suitor for the hand of the merchant's daughter.

The reader remembers that scene in which the invalid wife appeared before Margaret's father, in the little chemist's shop.

Joseph Maldon had expected to be forbidden the doors of North Villa. He was fully prepared to encounter the scorn and anger of Mr. Burton; he felt that his deeply planned game was lost, and that the young heiress would never be his.

But, to his unmitigated surprise, Mr. Burton said but very little upon the subject of this strange scene in Kale Court.

He asked no questions, he demanded no explanations, he uttered no reproaches. He took Joseph Maldon aside before leaving the chemist's wretched home, and addressed him thus: —

"I have discovered your secret, as you see," he said. "Under such circumstances, most people would forbid you ever again to cross their threshold. I am too tender-hearted to adopt such measures."

Had Joseph Maldon seen the expression of Andrew Burton's face as he uttered these words, he might, perhaps, have been rather inclined to doubt the extreme tenderness of the speaker's heart; but the two men were standing upon the threshold of the little shop in Kale Court, and their faces were hidden by the darkness of the November night.

"I do not wish to be unkind," resumed Mr. Burton. "Lilian loves you; the knowledge of this night's discovery would break her heart. Your wife is an invalid; she does not appear likely to live long. Let all things go on quietly; say nothing of to-night's business, and, when you become a widower, you can marry Lilian. She loves you, and she is rich."

The reader knows the result of this interview. Margaret Maldon grew weaker every day, and none but the wretched girl herself ever suspected the cause of this slow illness which wasted her delicate frame.

At the latter end of February business called Mr. Burton to Paris. He proposed that he should take Lilian with him, and that Joseph Maldon should accompany them.

The chemist immediately assented to this proposal. He went, but he did not go alone. His dying wife went with him.

There was a horrible, nay, almost hellish reason for this arrangement. In England, Margaret Maldon was not quite friendless. Her father lived in the neighborhood of Kale Court; he was a struggling tradesman, but he was respected by his neighbors, and he was devotedly attached to his daughter.

If by any chance his suspicions should have been excited as to the manner of Margaret's death, he would have moved heaven and earth to ascertain

the truth, and to obtain vengeance upon her destroyer.

It was therefore necessary that the wretched wife should die far away from that loving father.

Andrew Burton had never alluded to the existence of the chemist's wife after that evening in Kale Court.

Joseph had visited constantly at North Villa, and the marriage between him and Lilian was only delayed on the ground of Miss Burton's youth; no mention of the neglected wife had been made when Mr. Burton and his daughter met Joseph Maldon in Paris, nor had the merchant ever inquired as to the whereabouts of his future son-in-law. It seemed as if the merchant's most earnest wish was the union between this penniless chemist and his wealthy daughter.

This was the mystery which baffled Joseph Maldon's powers of penetration.

Andrew Burton and his daughter returned from Paris upon the third day after the murder in the Rue Gueneville. Lilian had heard of this mysterious poisoning case, which was occupying the attention of the Parisian police, but she had not even listened to the details of the horrible story.

Upon the night after the return of the father and daughter to North Villa, Joseph Maldon walked down to the gloomy old house to visit his betrothed.

The early April evening was cold and dark, an almost incessant rain drifted into the face of the pedestrian; but the mind of the young chemist was darkened by an inward gloom; he took little heed of the smaller miseries which harass the man whose conscience is free from sin.

Lights were burning in two of the windows of North Villa as Joseph Maldon approached the lonely house. He was admitted by the old woman, who led him into the gloomy sitting-room, in which he was in the habit of meeting Lilian Burton. But the young girl was not there. The room was empty. One candle burned upon a table near the fireless grate, but the corners of the spacious apartment were in total darkness.

Joseph Maldon seated himself near this one solitary candle. He looked around him with a shudder. The loneliness of the dark chamber oppressed and disturbed him. He was guilty, — guilty of the most awful, the most horrible of crimes. Henceforth, sleeping or waking, he must ever be pursued by the haunting image of the past. He rose from his seat, and was about to leave the deserted room in order to seek the members of the household, when the door was opened, and Andrew Burton entered the room.

The merchant was very pale, and there was a fixed and rigid expression about his mouth that was strange to Joseph Maldon.

"Where is Lilian?" exclaimed the young man, anxiously.

"In her own room," answered Andrew Burton. "You cannot see her to-night."

"Why not to-night?" asked Joseph Maldon.

"Because she is fatigued by her journey, and because I wish to have an interview with you."

The chemist uttered an exclamation of disappointment.

"I am sorry to hear this," he said; "I wished to have seen Lilian to-night of all other nights."

"Why so?" asked the merchant.

"Because to-night I am free. The barrier which separated us has been removed. I am free to implore her to fix the day for our marriage."

Mr. Burton uttered no word of surprise.

"I was aware of this," he said, quietly.

"Aware — of what?" exclaimed Joseph Maldon, with a rapid glance of alarm.

"Of the death of your wife," replied the merchant, with a peculiar significance.

"Indeed," returned the young man, carelessly, "I can scarcely understand how you should have heard of poor Margaret's death."

The elder man gazed with a searching glance upon the face of the younger.

It was not difficult for a close observer to perceive that Joseph Maldon's indifference was only assumed.

"I heard of it from public rumor," said Andrew Burton, slowly; "*all Paris is talking of it.*"

The chemist recoiled as if he had been shot. His face became deadly pale, and a cold sweat broke out upon his forehead. But he recovered himself by a powerful effort of his indomitable will, and it was with the same affected carelessness that he next spoke.

"You heard of my wife's death in Paris!" he said; "surely you must be mistaken, my dear Mr. Burton. Margaret died at an obscure village in Suffolk, where she was staying with a relative of her father's."

The merchant laughed scornfully. There was something almost demoniac in that harsh and discordant laugh. It sounded like the laugh of some fiend who triumphs in the wickedness of humanity.

"Come," he said, "come to my room. I wish to talk to you, and I wish to talk without fear of being overheard."

He took the candlestick from the table, and walked towards the door, followed by Joseph Maldon, whose face still wore the ghastly hue which it had assumed a few minutes before.

Mr. Burton led the way up the old-fashioned staircase to that apartment in which the chemist had attended him a few months before.

This chamber, like all the others in the dismal old house, was dark and gloomy; the walls oak-panelled, the furniture heavy in form and sombre in coloring. A large folding screen concealed one portion of the apartment.

Andrew Burton placed the candlestick upon the table, and, seating himself near it, motioned to Joseph Maldon to take a chair opposite to him.

"My wife sleeps in the next room," he said. "She will not hear us; and if she hears she will not understand. Her wits are gone."

He was silent for some moments, evidently thinking deeply, and watching Joseph Maldon furtively from under the shadow of his shaggy eyebrows.

"I heard of your wife's death in Paris," he said, after this brief pause, "and I hurried over here immediately, for I knew that you would not remain in that city. I knew that you could not remain there safely. You could not venture abroad in those splendid streets without running the risk of falling into the arms of some of Victor Canlot's agents. A dark vision haunted you in that brilliant capital. The shadow of a ghastly form came between you and the lights and splendor. The shadow of the *guillotine* was before you wherever you turned your aching eyes. The knife of the avenger haunted you sleeping and waking."

"What mean you?" exclaimed Joseph Maldon, in tones of suppressed fury.

"What do I mean?" echoed the merchant, with a sardonic laugh; "do you pretend to misunderstand me, Joseph Maldon? Bah! I thought that at least you were a sensible man. Do you think that you have deceived me? Do you think that I have not seen through you from the first? Yes; from the first! When first you became a visitor at this house, I saw that you had a secret. A gloomy shadow fell between you and the wealthy bride you might have won. I watched you closely, and it was not long before I discovered the nature of this mystery. That secret was the existence of a wife. You were not free to wed the heiress, Lilian. I watched you yet more closely, and I read you to the heart. Yes, Joseph Maldon, I looked into that dark and hidden page, in which were written your most secret thoughts; and what did I read there? Ambition, avarice, falsehood, daring!—all the attributes that make a criminal. I saw these, and I said to myself, '*He will kill his wife!*'"

Andrew Burton uttered these words with an icy deliberation that made them seem even yet more horrible than they really were.

Joseph Maldon stared at the speaker with a stony glare of unutterable terror.

This man's deliberate wickedness went so far beyond his own, that even his dark soul recoiled from the still blacker guilt of this fiend in human form.

"'He will kill his wife in order that he may marry the heiress,' I said," re-

peated the merchant, "and I waited quietly for the consummation of the deed which I knew would be done. When I heard, a few days since, of that mysterious murder which had thrown all Paris into a state of excitement, I recognized the hand which had accomplished the fatal deed, and I knew that you would immediately fly to London, in the hope that you might sink your identity amongst a free populace. I was right."

Joseph Maldon clasped his hands convulsively over his distorted face. Every word which this man uttered seemed like the thrust of a dagger whose point was plunged into the lacerated heart of the poisoner.

"Why do you agitate yourself thus?" exclaimed the merchant, coldly. "Think you that I seek to betray you? If I did so, I would not admit you to this house to-night, — you, who are a younger and stronger man than myself, and who might think it a small thing to commit a second murder, in order to screen yourself from the effects of the first."

"You will not betray me?" gasped the murderer.

"I will be as silent as death," answered Andrew Burton, "upon one condition."

"And that is —"

"That when you marry Lilian you will let me share the advantages of that union."

"How do you mean?"

"Between this and your wedding-day you will sign a deed transferring to me two-thirds of the fortune which you will receive with your wife."

"What!" exclaimed Joseph Maldon; "two-thirds of the fortune?"

"Yes; or you will take the consequences of your crime. I do not think that Lilian will consent to marry a man suspected of the murder of his first wife."

"Tempter, fiend, cool and calculating demon!" cried the chemist, in the shrill accents of despair. "I am in the toils. The net which you have woven for my destruction encompasses me upon every side. I am powerless to escape you."

"*You consent, then?*"

"Consent!" echoed Joseph, bitterly; "can I dare to refuse?"

"And you will sign the deed of transfer?"

"I will."

The merchant laughed aloud. He arose with an air of triumph, but, as he lifted his head, a strange apparition met his eyes, and he sank back upon the chair from which he had risen with a cry of terror.

His mad wife had heard the voices of himself and the chemist, and had risen from her bed in the adjoining room. She was robed in loose white garments, and her face was pale and wan. She looked like a visitant from the world of spirits, rather than a being of flesh and blood.

"Woe, woe," — she exclaimed, in strange and hollow accents, — "woe upon the guilty creatures in this accursed house!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MYSTERY OF PERCIVAL HOLMWOOD.

Aurora found poor Jack Primmins in a state of extreme terror at the delay that had occurred in her return to Monk Street. The Cheap Jack had been twice to the Brunswick Theatre, and twice back to his humble lodgings, in hopes each time of finding his adopted daughter either at the theatre or at home. But each time he had been disappointed, for Aurora and the stranger had gone through a narrow back lane, between the water-side and Monk Street, and had thus missed John Primmins, who had gone by the straighter and more frequented route.

The Cheap Jack was almost wild with joy when he clasped his daughter once more in his sturdy arms.

"You have a-nigh broke poor old Jack Primmins' heart, my pretty," he said, half laughing and half crying, "though he allers thought that there horgin was rayther a tough article afore to-night. Don't you come for to go for to try this here game on any more, my precious love, unless you want to see

poor Jack regular out of his mind; that's all I've got to say. What ever have you been a-doin', my little beauty?"

Aurora described her adventures, dwelling very much upon her description of the stranger in the ragged clothes.

"I know he's a gentleman, father dear," she said, "though his clothes were just like those of some poor penniless creature who hasn't a roof to cover him. He spoke just like the aristocratic gentlemen who come to the green-room at the theatre."

Mr. John Primmins shook his head very gravely.

"Did he now, my little beauty?" he said; "then I'll lay anythink he's a bad 'un. Whenever you meet with anybody what don't look like what he is, or don't talk like what he looks, you always make certain they aint up to no good. There's something underhand about him, my dear; he aint all fair and aboveboard. He's like my painted tin tea-trays, what looks like paper smashy, my pet; he's pretty to look at, but he won't wash. The color and the warnish 'll come off in hot water, my dear; he's a cheap harticle, and don't you have nothing to do with him."

"But, father dear," exclaimed Aurora, laughing at the Cheap Jack's warning, "why should this gentleman want to deceive me? He can expect to gain nothing from a poor girl like me. Ah, dearest father, I know how wise you are, but you must let me be the best judge here. I would lay my life that this gentleman is a good man. Think how kind and compassionate he is to have pity upon the poor homeless and friendless girls, who have no living creature to turn to in their hour of wretchedness."

The Cheap Jack shook his head once more.

"Oh, yes, my dear," he said, "very good and very compassionate, I dessay; but, Lord love your precious heart! you don't know no more of the wicked ways of this blessed city of London, than a new-born babe what's born blind and deaf, and never heerd nor see nothink in its life. How do I know but what this rose-colored gent's compassion and goodness may be all sham?"

"Sham, father!" exclaimed Aurora.

"Yes, my dear, there's a good deal of sham in this world; there's a precious deal more brummagem than genuine metal passes current nowadays. There's sham sovereigns, my love, and there's sham bank-notes, and sham diamonds, and sham silver; and there's sham goodness, and sham virtue, and sham generosity, and sham compassion likewise. Lord 'a mercy on us, my dear, it don't do to believe heverythink! You hear me tell the country folks as how the Universal Regenerator of Mankind Pills will cure hevery disease as hever was invented, since Adam took the measles of a sickly pig in the garden of Eden; but you do not believe in that 'ere pill, — do you, my dear?"

"Well, father," answered Aurora, laughing, "not very much."

"And you don't see *me* take the Universal Regenerator when I'm ill?"

"No, father."

"Of course not, my love," said Mr. Primmins, triumphantly. "Its one thing to sell medicines, and it's another thing to take 'em. Lor, I'm only like the rest of the world, my dear. You don't find your tip-top physicians feelin' their own pulses, and soundin' their own chesteses, when they find themselves rayther queer; they go to some other medical cove, and let him pummel 'em a bit. Shall I tell you why that is, my dear? It's because they don't believe in themselves, — they know it's all sham."

"Well, father dear," murmured Aurora, in that sweet, winning voice, which always had power to charm her honest-hearted protector, "I won't dispute this matter any further with you to-night, though I still cling to my own opinion about this eccentric stranger; but tomorrow you will have an opportunity of judging for yourself, as he is coming here to see us."

"Coming here!" exclaimed Mr. Primmins; "why, dang his imperence! I'm blest if he aint cheekier than that 'ere furriner we met down in Kent. What's he comin' here for, my precious pet?"

"To show me a picture, father dear,

—the picture of a lady whom he says I closely resemble."

"Well, I'm bothered!" cried the Cheap Jack, staring at his adopted daughter with an expression of complete bewilderment; "why, that's the third time as you've been told you was like some strange lady or t'other: first it's the furriner in Kent as tells you you're the livin' image of a lady *he* knowed; and next it's a real live baronight as tells you you're the very pictur' of a lady as *he* knows; and now here's this here ragged stranger, what smells of hotter of roses, and says you're exactly like a pictur' what *he* knows. Strike me stupid, my pretty, if this aint the rummiest go John Primmins ever know'd of, in business or out of business."

"O father dear," murmured Aurora, in a voice that faltered from the intensity of the young girl's agitation, "if this lady whom I so resemble should prove to be my mother!"

"But it's three ladies as you resemble, my precious beauty," answered the Cheap Jack; "you can't have three mothers; that aint possible, you know, my dear; at least not nowadays. I don't know what mightn't be in the olden times, before railroads and gas was invented."

Aurora sighed; the tangled skein of the nameless girl's history was not easily to be unwound.

She sighed as she thought of the raggedly dressed stranger, who had said, "I, too, am nameless. The name which I bear is not my own; the name which I should bear is not even known to me."

She retired to rest in one of the little sleeping-chambers adjoining the humble sitting-room. She could hear the nasal sound of Mr. John Primmins' steady snore through the fragile partition which divided her own room from that of her protector, and she knew that the Cheap Jack slept soundly after the fatigues of the day. But she herself could not sleep; the image of the mysterious stranger haunted her through the long hours of the silent night. She could not dismiss him from her thoughts; she could only look forward with eager impatience to the hour in which he had promised to come,—to the moment at which she might hope to see the portrait of this nameless woman whom she resembled.

The young girl snatched an hour's sleep after daybreak, by which time she had become thoroughly exhausted by the mental fatigues of the previous night; but she rose early, for the thought which was the ruling power of her innocent heart was with her even in her slumbers, and she rose eager for the hour at which the stranger was likely to come.

She prepared a comfortable breakfast for Mr. John Primmins, and, after having taken a very slight and hasty meal, seated herself at the window, with her needlework in her hand.

It was only a little after eight o'clock, yet she was already on the watch for the coming of the stranger. Mr. John Primmins ate as much bread and butter and drank as much coffee as would have provided about three moderate persons with an ample breakfast, and then walked over to the window against which his adopted daughter was seated working busily, and only raising her eyes now and then to glance through the open window into the narrow street below.

"So this here ragged swell is a-comin' here to-day, my dear?" said Mr. Primmins, interrogatively.

"Yes, father dear."

"Then I shall stop at home to receive him," said the Cheap Jack, planting his chair upon the ground with a loud bump, and seating himself opposite to his lovely charge.

"Of course you will, dear father," replied Aurora, smiling at her protector's determined manner. "The gentleman said he was coming to see *you* as well as me; and you know how much I wish you to see him, in order that you may confess that you were mistaken about him."

Mr. Primmins shook his head dubiously.

"I don't know about that, my dear," he answered; "I aint quite certain about that. It don't do to judge by appearances. Them as judges by the appearance of my first-class Sheffield cutlery thinks the knives'll cut, and

the forks won't bend double the fust time you go to stick 'em into anythink. Howsomdever, if the gent comes to see me, that'll be all fair and aboveboard, and I can't make no objections."

Mr. Primmins found plenty of employment for his morning in sorting his patent medicines, polishing his cutlery, and attending to the general interests of his stock in trade; while Aurora sat at the window working industriously at the plain needlework with which she was in the habit of eking out of the slender earnings of her protector and herself.

The young girl was very thoughtful; the hours seemed to wear themselves slowly to an end, and she looked up every now and then almost wonderingly at the Dutch clock, thinking that the hands must have stopped.

Ten, eleven, twelve, one o'clock struck, and Mr. John Primmins began to get rather fidgety about his dinner, which he was in the habit of eating at a very early hour. Aurora grew very silent and melancholy, for she thought the stranger had forgotten his promise of the previous night. The simple girl knew nothing of fashionable hours, and she imagined that after one o'clock the morning was over.

"He will not come to-day," she thought; "he has forgotten his promise, — perhaps forgotten even my existence. How foolish of me to think so much of him! I shall never see the picture. It will be the same in this case as with the Italian gentleman, and Sir Marmaduke Oswald. I shall never get any further clue to this mysterious lady whom I resemble."

She was about to leave the window in order to prepare the Cheap Jack's dinner, when she was startled by the sound of carriage-wheels in the street below.

A vivid flush of mingled hope and agitation arose to her cheeks as she heard that unfamiliar sound.

It was very rarely that any vehicle of higher grade than a baker's barrow was seen in Monk Street, Blackfriars.

Aurora looked out of the window, her eyes glittering with excitement, her heart beating rapidly with impatience.

An elegant cab, drawn by a superb chestnut horse, and attended by the smallest and most dashing of tigers, was standing before the door. The pale dream-colored gloves of the driver of this aristocratic vehicle were only visible from Aurora's post of observation.

Her heart sank as she beheld this equipage. It was impossible that the ragged stranger of the preceding night, gentleman though he might be, could be the owner of this cab and tiger.

"It must be a mistake, father dear," she murmured, in accents of undisguised disappointment. "It cannot be the gentleman we expect."

But in another moment she uttered an exclamation of joy. The driver of the cab had alighted. He was an elegant young man, dressed with that perfection of taste, which, although in the highest fashion, is never gaudy or outrageous; but, aristocratic and dashing as he was, Aurora recognized, in the waving golden hair, which fell low upon his neck, after the style of a German student, and the large luminous eyes, which were lifted inquiringly to the house, the eyes and hair which she had observed by the light of the gas lamps, upon the previous night.

"It is he, father dear!" cried Aurora. "It is he! I told you that he was a gentleman."

"Yes, my beauty; and I told you that he was a swell," answered Mr. Primmins, in a discontented growl. "I don't like swells; swells aint no good, especially when they comes across Blackfriars Bridge, makin' mornin' calls upon pretty girls. Why, I'll lay a wager as that young swell wouldn't come across Blackfriars Bridge to save his father's life, in a hordinary way. Why, his very 'oss would be agen it; the hanimal would shy when he come to Temple Bar. You don't know the airs and graces of them haristocratic 'osses, wot's fed upon gilded oats, out of mother-o'-pearl mangers, — as you may read in English history."

There is no knowing how much longer Mr. Primmins might have held forth upon this subject, had he not been interrupted by the entrance of the slatternly little maid-of-all-work belonging to the establishment, who brought a

gentleman's visiting-card in her grimy hand, and presented it to the Cheap Jack with considerable ceremony.

Mr. Primmins turned the card over and over in his great horny hand, and stared at the name engraved upon it, as if it had been written in Hebrew characters. Aurora looked over the shoulder of her adopted father, in her eagerness to see this card.

The name engraved upon it was "Mr. Percival Holmwood."

"Mr. Percival Holmwood!" repeated Aurora; "what a pretty name!" But in the next moment she remembered what the stranger had told her.

"The name which I bear is not my own. The name which I should bear is not even known to me."

"Is he to come up?" asked the little maid-of-all-work of Mr. Primmins, who was still staring at Percival Holmwood's card, in a state of utter bewilderment.

"He! Which?" said the Cheap Jack.

"The gentleman what left that," answered the servant, pointing to the card in Mr. Primmins' hand.

"Is he to come up? Well, yes, I suppose so."

"Yes, yes; to be sure!" exclaimed Aurora. "Ask Mr. Holmwood to walk upstairs."

Two minutes afterwards, Percival Holmwood entered the humble garret-chamber.

The raggedly dressed loiterer of midnight streets, — the man who, in outward resemblance, was one of those homeless and shelterless wanderers who know not where to lay their wretched heads, who are looked at with suspicion by every well-dressed and well-fed passer-by; this man who disguised himself in the garb of a beggar and an outcast, was no other than Percival Holmwood, the young millionnaire, whose history was an enigma to the members of the fashionable world in which he lived.

This mystery was only one secret in the life of this man. His whole life was a mystery. He was in his own person the most powerful argument in favor of the old saying, that truth is often stranger than fiction.

Let not the reader disbelieve in the story which we tell, because its incidents are strange and romantic. The romances of real life are more extraordinary than any tale invented by the fancy of the novelist.

Percival Holmwood greeted Aurora with the friendly, yet respectful manner with which a true gentleman always addresses a woman, however exalted or however lowly her position in life.

"You see I have not forgotten my promise," he said. "I have brought the miniature which you were so anxious to see. But you must first present me to your generous-hearted protector," he added, turning to the Cheap Jack.

Mr. Primmins stood rubbing his thick, short hair with his broad palm, and standing first on one leg and then on the other in his confusion. He found his suspicions melting away like snow in the sunshine of Mr. Holmwood's winning smile. There is something in the manner of a true gentleman which always inspires confidence, even in the most prejudiced.

"I'm sure I'm oncommon flattered by your wishing the honor of my acquaintance, sir," he said, reddening to the roots of his hair, as he addressed the young millionnaire; "and all as I can say is, the same to you, and many on 'em," he added, rubbing his hands, and looking rather triumphantly at Aurora, as if, in spite of his embarrassment, he thought he had said a good thing.

"This is John Primmins, sir," said Aurora, shyly, — "my noble adopted father, who has brought me up and taken care of me ever since I was a baby, and whose goodness I can never repay; no, not even if I were a queen," added the young girl, enthusiastically; "for all the diamonds in my crown wouldn't be worth as much as such disinterested goodness as his."

"Lord love your dear little heart!" exclaimed Mr. Primmins, rubbing his knuckles in his eyes, which had filled with honest tears as he listened to Aurora's words; "don't you go on so, my dear, as if there was anythink in wat I done more than any other cove would ha' done, and glad, on such a precious darlin' as you."

Percival Holmwood looked from one to the other, with a strange, wandering glance in his large blue eyes.

"Is this real?" he thought, "or is it acting? The girl is an actress, and she may wish to touch my heart by this display of simple goodness. She may wish to touch my heart, in order that she may find her way to my pocket. She would be only like the rest of the world if she did. What have I ever found but falsehood, even in the youngest and fairest? Can I ever again be beguiled and deluded by beauty, when I have seen the mask fall from one of the loveliest faces that ever glowed upon an artist's canvas, — when I have discovered the horrible secret of Blanche, Duchess of Arlington?"

While Percival Holmwood was musing thus, Aurora was waiting with almost painful eagerness for the moment in which he would show her the picture.

"The miniature, sir," she murmured, presently; "will you let me see it?"

"Yes, yes," answered the young man, rather abstractedly, "I had forgotten; you shall see it immediately."

He took a small oval morocco case from his pocket, and opened it.

He looked at it before handing to the eager girl.

"Merciful Heaven!" he exclaimed; "it is almost miraculous; every line, every tint, every feature is the same! Whoever this woman may have been, there is one thing certain, whether she was my mother or not, and that is —"

"Oh! what, sir? tell me!" gasped Aurora, trembling with emotion.

"That you are her daughter," answered Percival Holmwood, solemnly.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SEBASTIAN CONTES AND THE DUCHESS.

All the oldest and most aristocratic families in the neighborhood flocked to Arlington Woods, in order to do honor to the beautiful bride whom the duke had brought home to his Kentish mansion.

The duchess received her visitors with that exquisite grace which had been even more powerful than her loveliness in winning for her admirers during her brief reign as belle of the season.

She was alike to all, — old and young, rich and poor; and all were equally charmed with her, — equally ready to declare the Duchess of Arlington to be the most delightful and fascinating of women.

Many dinner-parties were given by the surrounding nobility and gentry, who were only too glad to have the duke once more a resident in the neighborhood.

At one of these parties a guest appeared, who was a stranger to Arlington Woods and also to Blanche Mortimer.

The guest was Sebastian Contes, the Spanish sculptor.

The young man had become known to the Duke of Arlington upon his first visit to England; and had executed a group in marble, at the order of Gerald Mortimer, who was a liberal and experienced patron of the arts, — always ready to encourage the genius of the young, always ready to gain name and fame to those who had before been comparatively unknown.

A few days after the duke's arrival in England, he was much surprised by meeting the young Spaniard in one of the avenues of the park.

The sculptor accosted the kind-hearted nobleman, who was pleased to recognize the young man whose evident genius had much interested him a few years before.

"I was about to call upon your Grace," said Sebastian Contes, "in order that I might ask a favor, which it will be in your pleasure either to grant or to refuse. There is a marble group in your entrance-hall of Perseus and Andromeda, which is the work of Canova, and of which no copy has ever reached Madrid. The favor which I would ask —"

"I understand," interrupted the duke, with hearty cordiality; "say no more about it, Senor Contes; you want to execute a copy of the group for some Spanish nobleman. You shall do so whenever you please, and, what is

more, you must take up your quarters in my house until you have completed your work. Send over your portmanteau at once. Lady Augusta Mortimer, who is the real mistress of the house, — my wife and I are only visitors here, — will, I know, be very happy to receive you."

"But, your Grace," murmured the young Spaniard, who was evidently much embarrassed by the kindness of the duke, "I cannot so encroach upon your hospitality."

"Nonsense, my dear Contes, I insist upon your coming. Allow me to have a royal privilege in this matter, — I do not invite, but I *command* your presence."

The generous-hearted nobleman shook hands with the young man and hurried away, leaving Sebastian no time for remonstrance.

"How good he is!" murmured the Spaniard, as he looked with a thoughtful gaze at the receding figure of the duke. "How can I inflict pain upon so generous a heart? And yet," he added, with a sterner accent, "is it not a solemn duty to unmask the guilty hypocrite who dares to seek a shelter on that noble breast?"

He sighed as he walked slowly away through the stately avenue.

That evening he entered the duke's mansion as an invited guest of its noble master; that evening he was introduced for the first time to Blanche, Duchess of Arlington.

We do not say he saw her that night for the first time, but he was first formally introduced to her.

There was a dinner-party at Arlington Woods, and it was amid the murmur of cheerful voices, and the soft, ringing sound of aristocratic laughter, that Sebastian Contes spoke to the duchess.

He bent over her, murmuring a few of the well-bred commonplaces which pass current in every drawing-room.

But presently he sank his voice to a lower key, though he still spoke with the careless indifference fashionable in our modern day.

"I had an especial reason for wishing to be presented to your Grace," he said.

"Indeed," said the duchess, carelessly; "may I ask what reason?"

"You were, I believe, acquainted with a particular friend of mine," answered Sebastian Contes.

The duchess raised her delicately pencilled eyebrows, with a half scornful expression. "May I ask the name of this friend?" she said, somewhat disdainfully; "my visiting list is rather a long one, but I will do my best to recall him to my recollection."

"He may be scarcely worthy of one passing thought," replied Sebastian; "to me he was one of the dearest and most familiar of comrades; to your Grace, he may, perhaps, have appeared a very insignificant person. He was an artist, — gifted, but unknown to fame. His name was Hubert Monkton."

The black eyes of the Spanish sculptor met the radiant ones of the duchess in a prolonged and steady gaze.

It seemed as if each would have penetrated the hidden depths of the other's soul.

The lady's beautiful face paled beneath the Spaniard's long and searching glance.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HISTORY OF A NAMELESS CHILD.

Let us return to the humble garret-chamber in which Percival Holmwood visited the Cheap Jack and his adopted daughter.

The miniature which he displayed to the wondering eyes of Aurora and her protector was indeed marvellous in its resemblance to the nameless girl.

Had the greatest portrait-painter in Europe attempted a miniature of Aurora, he could not have produced a more perfect likeness.

It was impossible for any one to gaze upon this picture without arriving at the same conclusion as that which Percival Holmwood expressed, when he, for the first time, compared the face of the friendless girl with the pictured resemblance painted upon ivory.

The woman whose features were re-

resented in that miniature could be no other than the mother of Aurora, — the Cheap Jack's unknown charge.

"It must be so," said Percival Holmwood. "I have no especial claim to declare myself the son of this woman, save the brief revelation which was made to me upon my one-and-twentieth birthday. But here is an evidence which none can gainsay. You can point to this miniature, and say, 'Here is the likeness of my mother.'"

Aurora gazed at the millionnaire with an expression of bewilderment. The delicate and sensitive nature of the young girl could scarcely endure this terrible excitement.

"O merciful Heaven!" she exclaimed, "can it be that I look upon the face of that mother whose tenderness I never knew? Can it be that I gaze upon her image, and yet am ignorant of her name, — ignorant even of whether she is living or dead? For pity's sake, sir," she added, clasping her hands in the energy of her appeal to the young man, "tell me all you know respecting this portrait. You can, at least, tell me how it came into your hands."

"I can do so," answered Percival Holmwood; "but in revealing so much I must make other revelations. In telling you this, I must also tell much of my own history. I can only do so upon one condition."

"Oh, name it, sir!" murmured Aurora. "Whatever it may be, I will cheerfully accede to it."

"If it's rale Sheffield cutlery, warranted fust-class, as you wants, a bargain," growled Cheap Jack, "you've only to say the word—"

"Hush! dear father, hush!" whispered Aurora, laying her fingers upon Mr. Primmins' lips. "Pray name your condition, sir," she added to Percival Holmwood.

"It is simply this," returned the young man; "before I reveal the secrets of the past, you and your adopted father must swear never to betray those secrets, — never to repeat one word of that which I shall tell you this day."

"I swear," said Aurora, gravely. "I swear by all that I hold most sacred, to be forever silent upon the subject of that which you may tell me."

"And so do I," added the Cheap Jack. "The same here; and if I ever splits upon it, bust me!"

Percival Holmwood smiled as Mr. Primmins made this declaration.

"You put it in rather a singular manner, my good friend," he said; "but, much as I have seen of the darker side of human nature, I feel inclined to believe in your honesty."

"Then don't you buy none of my Sheffield knives," returned Mr. Primmins; "for fear you should go for to change your opinions; and don't you look at the darker side of my tin tea-trays, or p'r'aps you'll find out that they aint paper smashy. Lord love you, sir, we're all on us honest *out of business*, members of parliament, and all sorts of swindlers."

"Hush, father!" murmured Aurora, reproachfully; "Mr. Holmwood is going to tell us about the picture."

"Yes," replied the young millionnaire, "I am going to do so, because I believe you have a right to know all that I can tell about that subject, and because I venture to hope that you will never betray me."

"Indeed we never will, sir," said Aurora.

"I told you last night," continued Percival Holmwood, gravely, "that I am, like yourself, one of those fatherless and nameless children who float along the tide of life, — mere bubbles upon the surface of the swift-flowing river. My first memories are of the city of Paris. I was a ragamuffin child, shifting for myself amidst that vast population, tossed upon the tumultuous ocean of that busy metropolis. I was anybody's child, and it was to anybody or nobody I owed the scanty food, the chance and comfortless lodging, which enabled me to live, — only to live. I had no thought, no hope, no dream, no ambition beyond that miserable existence, — that wretched vegetation in which animal life was held together by stray mouthfuls, such as those that are thrown to a homeless dog. I was as ignorant as the dogs with which I played; and more friendless, for some of them had masters."

Aurora looked compassionately at the exquisitely dressed and elegant young man, from whom this piteous confession seemed so strange. She stood leaning gently upon the sturdy shoulder of her warm-hearted protector; and, as Percival Holmwood described his miserable infancy, the young girl raised the horny hand of the Cheap Jack to her lips, and kissed it tenderly.

She was thinking of the loving eyes that had watched over her babyhood, and the strong arms which had supported her infant footsteps.

"Dear father," she whispered, bending her rosy mouth over her protector's ear, "what should I have been but for your goodness?"

"I think I was a brat six years old," continued Percival Holmwood, "when the current of my life turned,—when the whole tenor of my existence was changed, by an incident as romantic as anything which we read of in a fairy story. I was playing in the gutters of one of the narrow back streets of Paris, when I was startled by the sudden approach of a carriage and pair. The carriage was an open one, and upon the cushions of purple damask reposed a woman of imperious beauty, whose gorgeous dress and splendid appearance arrested even my childish gaze. I was lost in wonder at the aspect of this superb creature. The elegance of the equipage, the gaudy liveries of the servants,—all these splendid things to which I was unaccustomed, dazzled and bewildered me. I heard, but I did not heed, the warning cry of the postilions, and, before I had recovered from my astonishment, I was thrown down by a kick from one of the hoofs of the horse which passed nearest to me. The animal's hoof struck my head, and I fell, stunned by the blow."

"Poor child!" murmured Aurora; "this was indeed an unnecessary misfortune."

"It was no misfortune," exclaimed Percival Holmwood. "If wealth and luxury are desirable things, it was a very great blessing, for it was this chance alone from a horse's hoof which won for me all that I have ever since possessed. When I awoke from my swoon, I found myself lying upon the purple-covered cushions of the elegant vehicle which I had so admired, and half lost amid the voluminous folds of the costly silk dress worn by the woman whose beauty had bewildered and dazzled my childish senses. As I opened my heavy eyelids, I beheld her bending over me, her large black eyes fixed inquiringly and even anxiously upon my face. The horses were going at a tremendous pace through one of the long boulevards of Paris, but the motion of the carriage was so easy that I scarcely felt its progress.

"'You are not very much hurt, I hope?' the strange woman said, softly, in French, which was the only language to which I was then accustomed.

"'No, madam, not much,' I answered, even more bewildered by her kindness than I had been by her beauty, for it was perhaps more strange to me.

"'I trust that your parents will not be alarmed,' she said. 'I am taking you to my doctor, who is a very clever man; and, as soon as he has strapped up that nasty cut upon your head, I will take you back to the place in which you live, and I will give you a handsome present to console your parents for this accident.'

"'But I have no parents, madam,' I said, with the stupid indifference of one who scarcely knew the value of that which he had lost.

"'What!' exclaimed the lady, 'no father, no mother?'

"'No, madam.'

"'You are quite alone in the world, then?'

"'Yes, madam, quite alone.'

"'But where do you live, child?'

"'Anywhere, madam.'

"I might, perhaps, better have answered, nowhere, for it was often under the shelter of some stone porch, or in the nooks and corners of the quays, that I found my shelter.

"The lady remained silent; but she sat gazing at me earnestly, with her big black eyes fixed intently upon my face.

"'I have done a great deal of evil in this world,' she said, at last, speaking very slowly, and speaking to herself rather than to me; 'what if I were to

do one good action? What if I were to take pity upon this miserable child?'

"She said no more until we reached the house of the doctor.

"He was a benevolent-looking man, with gray hair, but he looked like a man who had made himself prematurely old by the rigid performance of hard duties, rather than a man who was old in actual years. He examined my head, laughed at the lady's alarm, and told her that her new horses had done no harm as yet, though she had received a warning that would teach her to be careful for the future. He dressed the cut which had been made by the animal's hoof, and carried me back to the carriage.

"As he was lifting me into the vehicle, he turned round and addressed the lady.

"'You will take this little ragged urchin home now, I suppose?' he said.

"'Yes,' answered the lady; 'I shall take him to my own house.'

"'To your house?'

"'Most decidedly. The poor child has no home of his own. He is a pretty little fellow in spite of his rags and dirt. I shall adopt him.'

"I was so steeped in ignorance that I did not even know the meaning of this word adopt.

"'Adopt that child!' exclaimed the doctor; 'why, mademoiselle, you are surely mad.'

"'Perhaps never more sane,' replied the lady, with a strange, proud bitterness in her tone, which I learned afterwards to understand. 'I wish to do one good action.'

"The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"'As you please, Mademoiselle Zoé,' he said; 'beautiful women, and women of genius, like you, are allowed all kinds of caprices; but promise me this,' he added, very seriously; 'if you take this child now, you must also take upon yourself the sacred charge of his future fate. It would be an act of cruelty to keep him in your luxurious home for a time, and then to fling him back upon the world when you grow tired of his blue eyes and yellow hair.'

"A dark frown contracted the handsome eyebrows of the lady.

"'*What do you take* me for?' she exclaimed. 'I tell you that I wish to do one good action. Do you think me so vile a wretch that I am incapable even of that?'

"'I think you are capable of a great deal that is good, Mademoiselle Zoé,' the doctor answered, gravely, 'if you would only give your better nature fair play. It is agreed, then, you take this boy forever, if you take him to-day?'

"'Yes,' she answered; 'I will take charge of him as long as I live; that may not be very long, perhaps,' she added, with a weary sigh.

"I wondered that any one who was so beautiful, and who rode in an elegant carriage, attended by richly dressed servants, could seem so unhappy as this lady appeared. In my brief experience of life, I had learned to associate poverty with unhappiness. I had seen the gaunt sorrows of want, the hideous sorrows of starvation, — I knew not that the rich were ever sorrowful.

"Mademoiselle Zoé ordered her coachman to drive home, and in about a quarter of an hour we passed through an avenue of trees which had often sheltered my slumbers, and under a marble archway which I had sometimes stared at in my ignorant idleness.

"This was the triumphal arch in the Champs Elysées, and we passed under this arch into the Bois de Boulogne.

"It was summer-time, and the trees in this wood were in all their verdant beauty; the grass was soft and emerald-tinted; and here and there in shady nooks, amidst the luxuriant foliage, tiny pools of clear water glittered like jewels in the bright June sunshine.

"The carriage stopped at a villa, a magical and fairy-like building in the very heart of the wood. It seemed like an enchanted palace, which some wizard had dropped amid the trees, and which might vanish at any moment, like those buildings we see in our dreams.

"Yet it was into this house that I, the friendless vagrant, the half-starved beggar-boy, was taken by Mademoiselle Zoé.

"I was given into the charge of a waiting-maid, who appeared to me second only in elegance to her mistress. This maid was called Sophie. She washed and dressed me, combed, brushed,

and curled my hair, which had before fallen in long, tangled masses upon my shoulders, and then conducted me to her mistress.

"Mademoiselle Zoé uttered a cry of delight when she beheld me.

"'I knew it would be so!' she exclaimed. 'He is as pretty as a little prince in a fairy tale. Do you think you can love me, my dear?' she added, taking me upon her knee.

"I wound my arms round her neck, and rested my head upon her shoulder. That subtile instinct which teaches a child that there is nothing on earth so precious as a mother's love taught me to cling to this woman, — the first who had ever spoken tenderly to me.

"'I shall love you very, very dearly,' I said. 'But am I really to live in this beautiful place?'

"'Yes, my darling.'

"'Always?'

"'Yes, always; or, at least,' she added, with a sigh, 'as long as I live.'

"I looked in a childish rapture around that elegant apartment, — a boudoir which art and wealth had alike combined to render elegant. Every object in that fairy-like chamber bespoke the opulence of a queen, the taste of a poetess. I was intoxicated with delight. I had indeed entered upon a new existence.

"Time passed; I know not how rapidly, for in my childish ignorance I kept no count of the progress of the days and weeks. At first the new life seemed like a bright dream, but by degrees it became more familiar to me; and, by and by, it was the old life — the life of poverty and starvation — which seemed like some dark vision, some nightmare of my childhood, which could not be real.

"I learned in time that my benefactress was a Jewess, — a Jewess and an opera-singer, — the most gifted and admired woman who had ever appeared upon the stage of the Parisian opera-house, but not the most innocent. There were dark clouds upon her past history. There were stories told of sacrifices of womanly dignity that had been made at the shrine of ambition. There were some who called my protectress mercenary, treacherous, cold-hearted. I was too young to know the real meaning of these words, but I knew that they cast some species of reproach upon Zoé Montelori, and, child as I was, my blood boiled as I heard them.

"These were but chance observations let fall in my hearing by the visitors at Woodland Villa, as Mademoiselle Montelori's house was called.

"The gifted songstress had many admirers, but among these there were only two who were ready to make any serious sacrifices to the beautiful singer, — there were only two who sought her hand.

"One of these two men was Sir Jacob Lioni, the Jewish millionnaire; the man to whom crowned kings looked for assistance in their pecuniary difficulties; the capitalist to whom nations appealed in their commercial dilemmas.

"The other suiter was an Italian, Antonio Sforza, an opera-singer like Zoé herself, — a reckless, extravagant fellow, who spent his splendid salary as fast as he earned it.

"Zoé Montelori was one of those women to whom wealth and splendor are necessary. Exposed to poverty, she would have pined and died. It may be that she had no power to love; be it as it may, it was towards the old millionnaire, Sir Jacob Lioni, that her choice leaned.

"Young as I was, I could perceive the fury of the Italian singer as he beheld that his wealthy rival was preferred. I had an instinctive horror of Sforza, but I loved Sir Jacob, whose open-hearted generosity had won my childish heart. I told Mademoiselle Zoé of my boyish hatred for the Italian; but she laughed at my fancies. Would to Heaven that she had listened to the warning which nature had implanted in the unguided instincts of a child! Would to Heaven she had dreaded Antonio Sforza as I dreaded him!

"Upon the day on which matters came to a crisis Sir Jacob dined with my mistress. The dinner was to have been *tête-à-tête*, but the Italian intruded himself upon Mademoiselle Montelori, making a duet which they were to sing on the following evening an excuse for his visit.

"I had left the room for some little

time, — for I ran about the costly villa, going where I pleased, and always meeting with kindness and indulgence, — I had left the drawing-room, and was re-entering it, when I was arrested upon the threshold by a scene which I shall never forget.

"The Jewish baronet was kneeling at the feet of the beautiful opera-singer, while Antonia Sforza stood at a little distance with his arms folded convulsively on his breast, and his brow contracted in a frown, which gave him the appearance of a Mephistopheles, — a fiend whose evil glance alone would have power to blight the Jewess and her wealthy lover.

"'Mademoiselle Montelori,' said the millionnaire, 'I do not ask you to give me that which the world commonly calls love. I am an old man, and I should be more than foolish if I could expect any such sentiment from one as young and beautiful as yourself. But if you can think well of me, — if you can look upon me as a friend, who, in offering you his name and fortune, feels that he gives very little, when he would almost as freely give his last drop of blood, if the shedding of that blood could do you service, — if you can do this, and if you will promise to be true to me, I shall be more than blest. I have spoken before Signor Sforza, because I know that we are rivals, and I wish that our rivalry should be an open one. Zoé, my beloved, I wait for your answer.'

"'And I will give it freely,' replied the beautiful opera-singer. 'I have been harshly spoken of, Sir Jacob; I have been called one of the marble-hearted sirens of Paris; and I will confess to you that wealth and luxury are dear to me, and that I could not willingly unite myself to an extravagant and dissipated man, who might squander my fortune upon that gaming-table on which he had lost his own.'

"Mademoiselle Montelori glanced at the Italian as she uttered these words. I could see that Antonio Sforza's sharp white teeth ground themselves into his lower lip with suppressed fury. He was a gambler and a profligate, and he bitterly felt the sting hidden in the words of the Jewess.

"'You accept me, then?' exclaimed Sir Jacob. 'You will be mine?'

"'I will," answered Zoé, 'and I will do my best to make a good wife.'

"'Heaven bless you for that promise,' murmured the Jewish baronet.

"'I, too, have to thank you, mademoiselle,' hissed the Italian in the ear of the songstress; 'I, too, have had my answer. I shall not forget your words of to-night. You have chosen well and wisely, no doubt, mademoiselle, yet I scarcely think that you will ever be Lady Lioni.'

"Zoé heeded not those bitter and significant words. She looked upon them as only the empty threat of an angry man.

"She did not know Antonio Sforza.

"That night the beautiful Jewess was murdered in her bed.

"She was found the next morning stabbed to the heart. Her sleeping apartment was situated upon the ground-floor; the windows opened into an Italian garden, ornamented with fountains in basins of sculptured marble.

"One or other of these windows was always left partly open, for the high-spirited singer had no thought of danger.

"Sir Jacob Lioni was wild with grief and rage at the loss of the woman whom he had so tenderly loved. He left no means untried for the discovery of the assassin. He offered an enormous reward. He neither slept night nor day. The police officers never left his house, and it was entirely owing to his relentless search after the murderer that the crime was at last traced home to its infamous author, Antonio Sforza.

"The Italian was at last discovered, several months after the murder, hiding in an obscure coffee-house, in one of the most wretched quarters of Paris.

"The people who harbored him knew nothing of his guilt, or they would have refused to give shelter to the treacherous assassin of Zoé Montelori.

"The murderer was seized, but he was never brought to trial; for, in spite of every precaution taken by those who captured him, he contrived to poison himself within a few hours of his arrest.

"Deprived of one friend, I found another in the noble Jewish baronet. I was a sacred charge to him, for I had been dear to the one whose unhappy fate had cast so black a shadow upon his life.

"He adopted me, acknowledged me as his heir, and gave me the name of a nephew who had died in infancy.

"Upon my twenty-first birthday, and only a few months before the death of this princely benefactor, Sir Jacob Lioni told me that the sole relic of my infant life was still in his possession, and that it was only right I should receive it from his hand.

"This relic was the miniature which I have shown you. It had been sewed in the folds of my coarse woollen waistcoat, and had been discovered by the lady's-maid who changed my clothes when I was admitted into Mademoiselle Montelori's household.

"This miniature is the only clue which I have ever possessed to my birth and parentage.

"I am a millionnaire, but the fortune which I possess was bequeathed to me by a stranger.

"I am rich in all things but in kindred; and wealth is powerless to win me happiness while I can share it with none that I love."

The young man paused. He had related the story of his life, and he sat with his head bent, his brow overshadowed with melancholy thought, waiting for Aurora to speak.

"It is indeed a strange story," murmured the young girl, softly; "but it is not altogether an unhappy one. This Sir Jacob was a very noble friend to you, Mr. Holmwood."

"He was indeed," answered Percival, gravely. "Had he lived, I should never have known sorrow; for my existence would have been devoted to making him happy. But he is dead, and since his death I have felt the full bitterness of being alone in the world. My wealth has seemed a burden to me, for I have no kindred with whom to spend it. One purpose alone has redeemed my life; one solemn purpose has preserved me from the worst sin which man can commit, the sin of being useless to his fellow-creatures. In the dead of the night, when my servants suppose that I am sleeping in my luxurious chamber, I leave the house in the disguise which I wore last night, and wander alone in the sordid and miserable streets in which the children of hunger and of sin, of poverty and of crime, hide themselves and their sorrows. I am the friend of the friendless, the protector of the homeless, the consoler and adviser of those lost, solitary creatures who have none to turn to in their dark hour of temptation and despair. Very often I fail in winning these wretched ones to turn from their evil ways, and to repent; but *sometimes* I succeed. Ah! you who know not the full misery of sin can never know the deep joy which swells the heart of him who feels that he has rescued a fellow-creature, — that he has snatched a priceless human soul from the black gulf of infamy. Then, ah! then, the blessed words of the gospel seem to shine out of earth's darkness in letters of holy light. Then, indeed, I believe that there is boundless joy in heaven over the one sinner that repenteth."

Mr. John Primmins hid his face in his broad, brawny hands and sobbed aloud. We know that the Cheap Jack was as tender-hearted and compassionate as a woman, and the earnest words of Percival Holmwood touched him to the quick.

"I wear rags," continued the young man, "in order that the ragged and houseless may think me poor and friendless as themselves, and may not, therefore fear to approach me. But I carry about me an unfailing token by which those who have once seen me, and even those who have only heard of me from their companions, can never fail to recognize me, in whatever costume or under whatever circumstances they may meet me. That token is a handkerchief powerfully scented with otto of roses."

"Well, I'm blest if your conversation aint got the werry same effect upon my eyes as peelin' inyuns!" exclaimed Mr. Primmins, as he rubbed his rough hands into those optics until they were terribly red and inflamed. "You wouldn't like to shake hands with a hignorant cove wot sells Sheffield

knives and paper smashy tea-trays, would you, sir?" he asked, humbly, looking doubtfully from his own rather dingy hand to the delicately gloved one of the young millionnaire.

"Yes, I would like to shake hands with you, Mr. Primmins!" cried Percival Holmwood, heartily grasping the hand of the Cheap Jack as he spoke; "for I do not think I could shake hands with a better man. What Sir Jacob Lioni was to me, you have been to your beautiful adopted daughter."

"No, I haven't," exclaimed Mr. Primmins, with considerable surprise; "I haven't left her a million of money."

"But you would have done so, if you possessed that money," replied Percival Holmwood.

"I'm blest if I wouldn't," answered John; "I'd have left her enough money to pay the national debt if I'd had it, and then not ha' thought I'd done enough for her, bless her precious heart!"

"And she thanks you as much, and loves you as dearly, for the intention, as if you had been able to fulfil it, father dear," said Aurora, in a low voice, for she had shed tears during the conversation, and now spoke in tremulous tones, whose music had a shade of melancholy. "She could never be more grateful to you, if you had made her a princess."

"But from this day you must abandon the Brunswick Theatre, Aurora." said Percival Holmwood, "and you must give up your trade, Mr. Primmins."

"Why?" exclaimed John and his charge simultaneously.

"Because the likeness to the miniature is to my mind a conclusive proof," answered the young man; "I feel all but certain that Aurora is my sister."

The lovely girl started and turned very pale. It was strange that, nameless and alone as she was, she uttered no exclamation of joy, no word of glad surprise or joyous hope. Her eyelids fell over her downcast eyes, her beautiful lips quivered.

She scarcely knew herself why it was that she felt no happiness in the thought that Percival Holmwood might be indeed her brother.

"Stop a bit!" exclaimed the Cheap Jack, suddenly laying his strong hand upon the slender wrist of his adopted child, — "stop a bit, master; you're a right-down good chap, I heartily believe, though in general I'm *rayther* a suspicious customer. Perhaps the best Sheffield knives have opened my eyes a bit to the vicked vays of this ere vorld. Howsomedever, listen to me: this young voman, as I've brought up and done for ever since six months before she cut her first tooth, may be your sister, but then on the other hand she mayn't; so I shall take the liberty of accepting nothing from you, and of keepin' a precious tight hold of her, until you *prove* as how she is, and then it'll be your turn to keep hold of her, bless her precious heart."

Percival Holmwood sighed.

"The question may be a very difficult one to prove," he said. "I see no hope of ever obtaining any clue to the secret. But surely you will suffer her to share my wealth?"

"No," answered the Cheap Jack, almost sternly. "I've brought her up upon Sheffield cutlery, and she's never known the want of nothink, and I'll contrive so to do until you can prove a better claim to her than the man who nursed her ven she vas a babby."

CHAPTER XL.

THE TRACES OF THE DEAD.

A DARK and melancholy shadow overspread the face of Percival Holmwood, and for some moments he remained silent. Aurora was also silent. She thought that her adopted father had been cruel and unjust to this noble-hearted young stranger, who was ready to claim a nameless and penniless girl as his sister. She felt this, but she felt also a strange thrill of joy at the thought that, in spite of the likeness which she bore to the miniature of the woman Percival Holmwood believed to be his mother, she might not really be the sister of the young man.

"Be it so," said Percival, presently. "Since you will believe in nothing but

legal and positive proof, that proof shall be found. Sooner or later it shall be produced. The mystery of my birth shall be unravelled, if it lies within the power of man to find the clue to the secret. The worldly-wise declare that money can effect almost any miracle. It is hard if I, a millionnaire, cannot discover the name of my parents."

The Cheap Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"There's some things not very easily found when you once lose 'em," he said, "and a man's identity is one of them very things. I may be the Duke o' Northumberland, or the Bishop o' London, for all I know; but if I can't prove it, nobody won't believe me."

Mr. John Primmins was a very good man, but he was mortal; and he could not help a feeling of jealousy which intermingled itself with his love for his young *protegée*. He could not bear to think that this aristocratic and elegant young man might claim Aurora as his sister, and elevate her to a rank in which she might perhaps forget her foster-father.

"I will ask nothing of you, Mr. Primmins," said Percival Holmwood, after a pause, "until I can produce the proof which you demand, except that you will let me have a friend in her whom you refuse me as a sister. Ah, do not shrink from me!" he pleaded, as the Cheap Jack shook his head doubtfully; "do not refuse me this one boon, which will shed a ray of sunshine upon a joyless life. Let me have your friendship, as well as that of your adopted child. You see me rich, and you think, perhaps, that I am proud, and that I know not how to estimate simple and honest worth like yours. You forget, then, what I am. You forget that I am the nameless child whose first memory is of the gutters of a foreign city,—whose first sorrows were cold and hunger. Accept me as your friend."

The young millionnaire stretched out his small and exquisitely gloved hand. Mr. Primmins paused for a moment, and shook his head irresolutely; then he suddenly grasped Percival Holmwood's hand between both his own, and shook it so heartily as to endanger the dislocation of the young man's wrist.

"I'm darned if I don't think you are a regular good 'un of the right sort!" exclaimed the Cheap Jack, "though you are a swell. I aint over-fond of swells in a general way, especially when there is a beautiful girl like my pretty one here in the case. But I'm darned if I don't think you're to be trusted, Mr. Pussival Holmwood."

"You shall never have reason to repent your confidence in me, Mr. Primmins," replied the young man, with enthusiasm; "and since it is agreed that we are to be friends, you will surely accept the aid of my purse, and remove your beautiful charge to a place better adapted to her loveliness,—a place in which she will be no longer exposed to admiration that is near akin to insult, and a place in which her education, which has perhaps been neglected—"

"No, it aint!" exclaimed the Cheap Jack, indignantly; "nobody shall say as how my little beauty's larnin' has been neglected by her poor adopted father, ignorant as he is. Why, there's not a book in my stock, sir, that my pretty can't read right off, whether it's French or English; and I'm blest if I don't believe she'd read 'em if they was in half a dozen other languages. And whether it's music, or whether it's singin', or whether it's dancin', she's as clever at it as the richest lady in the land. I'll tell you what it is, sir; the fairies was all at my beauty's christenin', and one of 'em gave her this gift, and one of 'em gave her t'other, and what's more, I believe there wan't no malicious hold fairy what came too late for a plate, and knife and fork, to spile the game; I don't believe there wan't."

Percival gazed with a look of evident admiration at the young girl, whose radiant eyes were shrouded by their drooping lids.

"If beauty be a fairy gift," he said, earnestly, "your adopted child is indeed richly dowered, and I am proud to think she is also so accomplished. But, as you have so long been her only friend, you will surely not refuse to accept from me some portion of the

wealth which is so powerless to buy happiness, or to purchase regard."

"Hold hard, sir!" cried John Primmins; "you're a generous young gentleman, I make no doubt, and you're altogether in the givin' line; but you forget that all the money as you could give us wouldn't make up for what you'd rob us of."

"And what is that?" asked Percival.

"Our independence," answered the Cheap Jack; "we'll keep that, and you shall keep your money. We'll be as good friends as ever you like, though you are a millionnaire and a swell; but we'll live as we've lived before,— upon our own humble earnings."

"I cannot dispute your decision, Mr. Primmins," said Percival, "and I will do nothing to forfeit your friendship. I must leave you now," he added, after consulting his watch; "it is growing late, and the duties of —"

He hesitated for a moment, wondering by what name he should address the young girl, who was in reality nameless like himself. But Aurora came to his assistance.

"You will call me Aurora, will you not?" she pleaded. "All who know me best call me by that name."

"Yes — yes!" exclaimed Percival, "I will call you Aurora; but I must leave you now; it is growing late."

The young millionnaire spoke the truth. Some hours had passed since he had entered the Cheap Jack's humble lodging. The March afternoon was drawing in, and dusky shadows were already gathering in the garret-chamber.

John Primmins and Aurora rose to accompany their guest downstairs to the door of the house. Percival would have declined this attention, but the Cheap Jack insisted.

As they were descending the staircase, Mr. Holmwood paused to address John Primmins.

"This neighborhood in which you live is rather a strange one,— is it not?" he asked.

"Well, I believe there are some oncommon rum coves about here," answered Mr. Primmins; "and, for the matter of that, I think one of the rummiest customers as ever I see hangs out in this very house."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Percival; "who is this strange person?"

"Why, that's a'most more than I can tell you, sir," replied John; "he calls himself a Portugee, and he aint by any means a ill-lookin' chap; but, somehow or other, I never comes across him sudden-like, that I don't feel as if cold vater was a-rumnin' down my back and into my boots."

"You don't like his appearance, then?"

"Well, not particular. I aint particular fond of boa-constrictures, if it comes to that; and if this here Portugee aint fust cousin to a boa-constricture, I'm a Dutchman."

Percival Holmwood made no reply to this speech. His thoughts had wandered while the Cheap Jack had been talking. He walked down the narrow staircase in silence, followed by Aurora and her adopted father.

But within a few paces of the door which opened into the parlor occupied by the Portuguese captain, Percival Holmwood paused suddenly, and uttered an exclamation of surprise, — a suppressed exclamation, it is true, but sufficiently loud to reach the ears of Aurora.

"What is the matter?" the young girl asked, eagerly.

"Hush!" whispered Percival, laying his finger on his lip.

A man was standing upon the threshold of the door of the Portuguese captain's apartment. He was wrapped in a loose great-coat, which concealed his figure. The lower part of his face was hidden by a woollen handkerchief muffled about his chin; but he had just removed his hat, and the upper part of his face was distinctly visible by the dim light of an oil lamp which had been newly lighted in the dark and narrow passage.

That face once seen was not easily to be forgotten. The eyes alone distinguished it from all other faces. These eyes had the blank, expressionless gaze rarely seen except in the eyes of the blind.

The reader will recognize the man by this peculiarity.

He was Philip Howland, the confidential footman of the Duchess of Arlington.

Percival Holmwood's position enabled him to see this man without being himself observed. He was completely hidden by the darkness of the narrow passage, at the extreme end of which he stood.

The footman was speaking to some one within the chamber.

"I must have half an hour's conversation with you," he said.

"What about?" asked a sonorous voice from within.

"About the business at the Raven."

"What can you have to say about that?"

"No matter," answered Philip Howland; "I tell you I must talk to you about it; that's enough. When can you see me?"

"As soon as you like, if I *must* see you," returned the voice; "now, if you like."

"Let it be so, then," said the footman, pushing open the door, which had been ajar all this time.

He entered the chamber occupied by the Portuguese captain. He closed the door behind him, and Percival Holmwood heard a key turned in the lock.

"Listen to me, Mr. Primmins," said the young millionnaire, in an earnest whisper; "you know very little of me, but you have generously promised to trust me. Will you help me in a matter of life and death?"

"I'll help you in anything as an honest man ought to help in," answered the Cheap Jack; "what's your game?"

"I want to hear the conversation which has just begun in that room."

Mr. Primmins shook his head.

"I don't like listening in a general way," he said; "it aint what your classical scholars call the cheese; but if it's a matter of life and death—"

"It is a matter of vital moment," answered Percival, eagerly. "I have reason to believe that the man who has just entered that room was the instrument in a dreadful crime, and I have reason to believe also that he has come *to* this house to-night to discuss the *concealment of that* crime."

"*Then, in that case,*" said Mr. Primmins, "I should think the sooner you was on the listen the better. Let's see how it's to be done. The Portugee allus keeps his bedroom door locked precious tight, so you won't get in that way; but there's the back yard and the back winder. Do you feel yourself equal to clamberin' up the back winder and pushin' your head in?"

"I will do anything," exclaimed Percival. "Come, Mr. Primmins, come; the moments we are losing are precious; show me how I am to act, and leave the rest to me."

The Cheap Jack opened a door, which led into a little stone-paved yard, surrounded by high walls that shut it in like a vault. This back yard was overlooked by the window of one of the rooms occupied by the Portuguese sailor.

The window was at a considerable height from the ground, but midway between the yard and the window there was a wooden cistern.

Percival Holmwood sprang lightly on to the edge of the cistern, and slid along it until he found himself beneath the window. He then noiselessly and cautiously vaulted on to the window ledge, which was broad enough to support him as he clung to it with his knees, balancing himself by the wooden shutter outside the window.

The window was closed and fastened with a bolt; but the young man wore a ring containing a brilliant of the first water. With this gem he rapidly cut away a square of glass, forming an aperture large enough for the insertion of his hand.

Having done this, he unbolted the window, raised it softly, and looked into the room.

The bedchamber of the Portuguese captain was dark and empty, but the door communicating with the sitting-room had been left ajar, and a streak of brilliant light streamed through the aperture.

After cautiously examining his ground, Percival Holmwood crept through the open window, and stepped on to the soft carpet which covered the apartment of the mysterious foreigner.

An odor of opium filled the small

chamber, but from the adjoining apartment there floated a more pleasant odor, — the perfume of delicately fragrant Turkish tobacco, — tobacco rarely obtained in England save by the wealthiest.

Percival Holmwood crept stealthily to the door between the two apartments, and knelt down, with his ear close to the opening. In this position he could hear every word that was spoken within.

It was the footman who was speaking.

"I tell you that she won't listen to reason," he said. "She declares that I have deceived her, or that you deceive me, or that there has been some deception somewhere; she declares that Hubert Monkton is not dead, and that she saw him in Paris the other day."

"Then she saw the dead," returned the deep and sonorous voice of the man who called himself a Portuguese; "she saw the dead. If she saw Hubert Monkton, she saw a ghost from the grave."

For some moments the footman made no reply to this speech, but, presently, he said, thoughtfully: —

"Strange mistakes have sometimes been made in such cases as this, Gambia. What if there should have been a mistake here, — a strange and a fatal one? What if the man who met you at the hotel should not have been Hubert Monkton, the artist?"

"Bah!" exclaimed the Indian, — for it was he who had represented himself as a Portuguese sailor to the ignorant people of the neighborhood, — "do you take me for an idiot, Englishman? Do you think the worshippers of Bowaknee, the goddess of murder, are fools, and know not what they do? The man who met me at the hotel near Blackfriars Bridge was Hubert Monkton; the man who went with me from that hotel to the Raven was Hubert Monkton. If you want a proof, wait, and I will give you one."

At this point Percival Holmwood ventured to push the door a few inches further open. He was by this means enabled to watch what was taking place in the next apartment.

Gambia, the Indian, had arisen from the divan upon which he generally reposed, and was standing before a Chinese cabinet of exquisite workmanship.

From one of the tiny drawers of this cabinet he took a card, which he handed to Philip Howland.

"You see that card?" he said.

"Yes," answered the footman; "it bears the name and address of Hubert Monkton."

"And it was taken from his waistcoat-pocket."

"When?" asked Philip Howland.

"When he had no longer need of name and address," answered the Indian, with horrible significance.

As he said these words he approached the door, behind which Percival Holmwood had concealed himself.

Heaven knows what might have been the fate of the young millionnaire had he been discovered by that bloodthirsty and unscrupulous man; but, at the very moment in which he would have been caught in the trap which he had so rashly entered, he was saved by a providential accident.

"Then I may tell ——, the person who employed and paid us, that Hubert Monkton never left the Raven alive?" Philip Howland said, interrogatively.

Gambia, the Indian, paused to answer this question, and while he lingered with his hand upon the lock of the door, Percival Holmwood crept with a light footstep to the door opening from the bed-chamber into the passage. He felt for the key of this door, turned it softly, opened the door with consummate caution and rapidity, and slipped out into the passage.

Here he found Mr. Primmins sitting at the bottom of the stairs, waiting patiently for him.

There were many lodgers in the house, and the establishment was altogether rather a noisy one. It was for this reason that Percival's movements had failed to attract the subtle ear of the Indian.

He spoke a few words to Mr. John Primmins, and promised to return in a day or two; then he hurried from the house with the same cautious footstep with which he had crept from the Indian's apartment.

He did not wish that his departure should attract attention. For this reason he signalled to his tiger to lead the horse and cab to the further end of the street, where he sprang lightly into the vehicle.

It was by this time nearly dark. But Percival Holmwood did not drive back to his apartments in the Albany. He drove westward, but turned aside when he reached Sloane Street, and drove to the dismal-looking corner house in Cheyne Walk.

This house seemed utterly unoccupied upon the side which fronted the street, but, on Percival Holmwood's knocking at the low oaken door, a light appeared through the dingy fanlight, and, in another moment, the withdrawal of bolts and the unfastening of a chain were heard within.

The person who opened the door was Isadora Monkton, the girl whose life had been so strange and lonely since the disappearance of her Cousin Hubert.

She admitted Percival Holmwood to the ill-furnished and gloomy sitting-room, in which candles were burning.

"I am alone," she said; "Sebastian Contes is in Kent."

"In Kent!" exclaimed Percival.

"Yes; he is at Arlington Woods. He is beneath the roof that shelters *her*. But your pale face tells me that you have news,—strange news, terrible news. Do not trifle with me; let me know at once what has happened."

"Isadora Monkton," said the young man, earnestly, "you have told me you have the gift of second sight. You have told me that you are *certain* of your cousin's murder."

"Yes, yes, I tell you," answered Isadora, with the gloomy accent of despair. "I have told you more than this,—I have told you that I *saw* him murdered."

"Tell me once again the particulars of that dreadful vision."

"I will do so," replied Isadora. "It had struck twelve upon the night of his disappearance, and I sat alone,—alone in the dismal chamber which had been dear to me when he was present. *I had grown weary* with my long *watching, but I had not once* closed my eyes; I felt no inclination to sleep. I sat with my eyes fixed upon the blank wall before, when, suddenly, as the clocks of the neighboring churches chimed the quarter after twelve, the dark wall faded away, and through a strange grayish vapor I saw a horrible scene enacted before my bewildered gaze. Standing with his back towards me, was a man who leaned carelessly forward on the back of a chair, engaged in conversation with another man, whose face was turned towards me, but whom I had never seen before."

"Tell me," exclaimed Percival Holmwood, eagerly, "what was this man like?"

"He was tall," answered Isadora, "tall and dark, very dark, with the deep olive complexion of a native of some Eastern clime. His eyes were small, but brilliantly black; his hair was straight and silky."

"Yes, yes," cried Percival; "it is the same!"

"What! you have seen this man?"

"Yes, I have seen him to-night for the first time, and then only for a moment. But I believe that it is the same man, and for the first time in my life I recognize this marvellous gift of second sight. But continue your story."

"Alas! I have little more to tell," returned Isadora; "for a few minutes these men remained in conversation; then the candle which lighted the wretched apartment in which I beheld them was suddenly extinguished. There was a rapid struggle, a strange gurgling noise, which sounded like the death-gasp of a man who had been strangled, and then a heavy fall. Then the man with the dark face relighted the candle. I saw his features once more as he bent over the blue glare of the lucifer match. The body of the young man lay prostrate upon the floor; I could not see his face, but I saw the other man kneel beside him and ransack his pockets, and then I, for the first time, heard him speak. He murmured, in a low, sonorous voice, 'No one will ever be troubled again by the obstinacy of Hubert Monkton.'"

Isadora covered her face with her hands as she ceased speaking, as if the

memory of this vision were almost too painful for endurance.

"It is strange!" exclaimed Percival Holmwood; "and this occurred upon the 16th of October?"

"Yes, at a quarter after midnight."

"And it was between two and three that I saw Lady Blanche Vavasour pacing up and down her apartment, and saw also the return of the man whom I have again seen this night."

"But you have discovered something of importance to-night," said Isadora; "your manner tells me that you have done so."

"I have discovered the name of the place in which Hubert Monkton was assassinated," answered Percival Holmwood; "that place is called the Raven, and is doubtless some obscure tavern in the neighborhood of Blackfriars. My next business must be to discover the place itself."

"And you have no clue?"

"None, except its name, and the assumed name of the murderer."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DETECTIVE'S DOG.

WITHIN a week of the night upon which Percival Holmwood visited Isadora Monkton at the house in Cheyne Walk, the young millionnaire had kept his word.

He had discovered the obscure and disreputable little tavern, hidden away in one of those alleys whose existence is scarcely known to any one except the unhappy wretches who find a shelter in their tumble-down habitations.

Percival Holmwood was the friend of the homeless and of the helpless, and from one of the lost creatures whom he had befriended, he discovered the neighborhood of the place he so much wanted to find.

"The Raven is a tavern in Black Alley," said his informer, — "a desperate place, sir, and, for Heaven's sake, don't think of going inside the doors of it alone. They do say that there's some been seen to go into that place that have never come out alive. I hope it aint true, sir, but I've heard it, and I'd have you take warning."

Percival thanked the man for his information; but even in spite of this he would have had no fear of entering the tavern alone, but he had a purpose to perform which could not be effected without the assistance of those who were allied with him in his vow of vengeance. Early in the forenoon of the seventh day after his interview with Isadora Monkton, the millionnaire and Sebastian Contes, the Spanish sculptor, met at a respectable hotel near Blackfriars Bridge. It was that very hotel from which Hubert Monkton had been decoyed away to his death.

They were shortly joined by the Jesuit, Luigi Malatesta, the fourth member of that avenging league.

The Italian brought with him a dog.

"The dog belongs to one of our greatest detective police-officers," he said, in answer to an inquiring look from Percival Holmwood. "He will assist us in the task which lies before us."

The task of which Luigi Malatesta spoke was the search for the body of the murdered man.

The three allies had chosen this early hour in the day as the time for their visit to Elizabeth Hepwell's horrible abode; for at this time they were less likely to be refused admittance than after dark, when the house was filled with thieves and ruffians.

They had not miscalculated in arriving at this conclusion. They strolled into the miserable tavern, seated themselves at one of the wooden tables in the low, cellar-like tap-room, and called for a bottle of wine.

It was brought to them, and proved to be of a far better quality than is to be met with in many respectable hotels.

Mrs. Elizabeth Hepwell's customers knew good wine, and paid enormously for what they drank. The tavern was quite empty at this early hour of the day, and Mrs. Hepwell was alone in the low bar where the liquors were kept.

Ten minutes after entering the tap-room, Percival Holmwood summoned the old woman, and exhibited to her a magistrate's warrant, authorizing him in a search of her house. The wretched woman's withered face became of a dull

grayish-white. Never was terror more plainly visible in any human countenance.

But Percival Holmwood was immovable. The three men left the wretched mistress of the house shivering and moaning in the bar, and entered the different miserable chambers upon the basement.

In one of these chambers, the third which they had entered, they found a miserable-looking bed, hung with dingy curtains which had once been white.

They approached this bed, and, as they did so, the detective's dog flew suddenly under it with a low growl of suppressed fury, and began scratching violently at the boards.

"I was told so," said Luigi Malatesta, pale and horror-stricken, pointing to the dog, as he spoke,—"I was told that if any deed of violence had been done, that animal would discover the scene of it."

He knelt down and examined the spot, over which the dog was still scratching.

Two of the boards were loose.

Five minutes afterwards, the three men had pushed aside the bedstead, and had removed these two loose boards.

There was nothing beneath them but a horrible pit, large enough to contain the body of a man, and filled with quicklime.

It was thus that the murderer had hidden his victim. It was thus that the cold-blooded assassin, the treacherous, paid instrument of an infamous woman's guilt, had concealed and done away with all the traces of his crime.

"This is too dreadful!" exclaimed Percival Holmwood; "we are no nearer justice than we were before. This beautiful fiend, this lovely duchess, whose hand is red with the blood of the man whose only crime was to love her, will defy our vengeance. She will laugh at the laws of her country, so long as she can bribe her two accomplices to silence."

"But she may not always be able to do that," said Luigi Malatesta, with a *sardonic* smile.

"No," replied Percival. "I am *richer than she is; I will* contrive to see this footman, this agent of her guilt, and, if wealth can bribe him to become the instrument of justice and retribution, he shall be bribed."

Ten minutes after this the three men left the wretched tavern, defeated and humiliated.

Each of them felt convinced that the Raven had been the scene of a crime; but they were powerless to act, for they could prove nothing, and the law demands positive proof.

CHAPTER XLII.

CHANGES.

Let us pass over a period of a year, and let us once more enter the stately ducal mansion of Arlington Woods.

Strange and numerous changes have come to pass within this one circle upon the dial-plate of Time.

The Duke and Duchess of Arlington are spending the early spring-time at their Kentish mansion; but they are not alone.

Lady Augusta Mortimer still acts as the practical mistress of that superb establishment, for the lovely duchess cares little for domestic duties. A consultation with a house-keeper, or a visit from her French cook, is a terrible infliction upon her; so all is left to the widowed sister-in-law of the duke.

Adela Mortimer has been married to her Cousin Theobald for nearly a twelvemonth, and a son has been born to the young couple.

But no heir has blessed the union of the duke and duchess, and Gerald Mortimer sighs as he watches his nephew's child. The generous heart of the nobleman yearns towards this helpless infant; but he yet hopes that a day may come upon which childish lips may call him "father."

In the mean time, the tiny baby nestling in his cradle—disturbed by no dreams of future greatness, or visions of boundless wealth—is heir presumptive to the Arlington dukedom.

Nothing can exceed the happiness of Adela Mortimer,—the loving wife, the proud young mother. She spends the

best part of her life in the pretty apartment devoted to the tiny heir. She lingers hour after hour, bending fondly over his cradle. She is never tired of gazing upon that infant face, never weary of listening to the indistinct murmurs of those baby lips.

She is very happy, for Theobald Mortimer has acted with a noble courage, a sublime fortitude. He has never allowed his young and simple-hearted wife to discover that his marriage was one of duty and not of love.

Yet the fatal madness of his terrible infatuation still possesses him, hidden, as it may be, beneath the changeless outward calm. The tempest still rages fiercely in the lowermost depths of his soul, however smooth may be the surface of the waters. He still loves his uncle's wife.

In spite of every struggle, against reason, against hope, he still loves this woman, whose wondrous beauty had bewitched him in the first moment in which he gazed upon her face.

But pity him, even while you blame him, for this mad folly. He never betrayed himself by word or look. In all outward seeming — in every duty that the most tender affection could prompt — he seemed devoted to his wife; but one who watched him more closely, and knew him better than any other, — one whose eager eye was never idle, whose glance never faltered,—read the dark secret of the young man's breast. This watcher was Luigi Malatesta, the Florentine. He still held his place in the household, but he was no longer the companion of Theobald Mortimer. He had assumed more important and graver duties. He had accepted the post of private secretary to the Duke of Arlington.

In this position he had ample opportunities for observing the different moods of the master of the house. In this position he could be forever upon the watch; forever near to work onward towards the slow accomplishment of his hidden purpose.

That purpose was to secure the enormous fortune of the Duke of Arlington to himself, and through the possession of that fortune to ascend to one of the proudest elevations the Church of Rome can bestow upon her chosen children.

He knew that the twin roots of power are knowledge and wealth. He was possessed of one, and he looked to that to win him the other.

Other changes had occurred within the twelve months that had passed since the marriage of Theobald and Adela.

Joseph Maldon had married the merchant's daughter, Lilian Burton. He had signed the document by which he surrendered to Andrew Burton the half of that fortune which had been so mysteriously bequeathed to the young girl by a man whom she had never seen. Joseph Maldon, the arch-traitor, the cold-blooded murderer of his innocent wife, had wedded the simple and trusting Lilian while his soul was newly darkened by the horrible crime which he had committed in the Rue Gueneville.

He had married her for the fortune which she possessed. He knew not what love was; his cold and avaricious nature was utterly incapable of any generous or tender feeling. His first marriage had been a marriage of convenience. His second was a marriage of interest. The fortune which had been left to Lilian Burton was twenty thousand pounds. Joseph Maldon was compelled to surrender the half of this to the designing and thrice-guilty man who had calculated upon the chemist's crime. The other half passed into the bridegroom's possession upon his wedding day.

Ten thousand pounds was a very comfortable sum, but it was not enough to secure a life of luxury and independence. Joseph Maldon had still to fight the battle of life in spite of the prize which he had secured by such guilty means. He applied to the Duke of Arlington, the wealthy nobleman who had offered to become his patron. Gerald Mortimer readily listened to the young man's brief statement of his prospects. He saw that he was clever, and he believed that he was honorable and deserving.

The practitioner of a small town called Mildrington was about to sell his practice and retire from the exer-

cise of his profession. The duke recommended Joseph Maldon to purchase this practice, which was to be had for a few hundreds; and he further promised to employ the young surgeon in such minor cases as might safely be trusted to his brief experience. After some unavoidable delay, during which Joseph Maldon contrived to obtain his diploma, — he had walked the hospitals while living in the obscure alley called Kale Court, — the practice was purchased, and the young man took his wife to Mildrington, where he was to occupy the house of his predecessor. Lilian Burton had not yet learned to repent of her girlish choice. The hypocrite was too deeply skilled in the art of dissimulation to throw off his mask directly he had secured the hand of his victim. The young bride was gentle and submissive; she obeyed her husband in everything; she admired him and trusted him; she was a slave to his every caprice, always eager to please, always amply rewarded by a smile or a hollow word of kindness.

He had no reason, therefore, to be otherwise than kind to her. He was not a bad-tempered man. His cold and selfish disposition only evinced itself to those who thwarted him, and his wife never had yet opposed him by word or look.

A twelvemonth had passed, and a son had also been born to the surgeon and his wife, — a beautiful little fellow, with eyes as bright as those of the baby heir to the dukedom of Arlington, — as bright, but not of as deep or as dark a blue.

Lilian Maldon had been introduced to Adela Mortimer, and she had been charmed by the amiable condescension, the frank good-nature of Theobald's young wife.

Joseph Maldon was often in attendance at Arlington Woods. In so large a household there was generally some who wanted, or fancied they wanted, medical advice, and the surgeon was generally invited to dine when he drove over from Mildrington to the ducal mansion. Upon these occasions Luigi and Giuseppe, the two brothers, met; but they met as strangers. Each had preserved his secret. Luigi Malatesta had no wish to identify himself with the prisoner whose crime might one day come to light. Yet he would not betray his brother. But he shrank from him with an inward shudder of horror when he remembered the midnight scene in the Rue Gueneville.

No allusion had ever been made to that horrible scene; indeed, it had so happened that the brothers had never met except in the presence of others. It may be that this was the result of accident, or it may be that both avoided a solitary meeting.

The shadowy likeness between the brothers had only been noticed by the Duchess of Arlington. She watched them often long and earnestly, waiting for some word or look which would betray a relationship between the two; but no such token ever came, and she began to think that she must have been mistaken.

Philip Howland still held his place in the household of the duchess. Had any one seen the account kept at a London banking-house by the footman, they would have wondered that so rich a gentleman could consent to wear powder and livery, and perform the menial offices of a lackey.

But there was a new servant in the household at Arlington Woods, — a man who had entered the service of the duke at the recommendation of Philip Howland, whose influence with his beautiful mistress was, as we know, very great.

This man was a foreigner and Italian, called Signor Baptisto.

There were some people who said that the complexion of Signor Baptisto was darker than that of any Italian they had ever before beheld; but, of course, Signor Baptisto was answerable to no one for the color of his skin. He was a very good servant, and had acted as courier to the duke and duchess during a Continental tour which they had taken in the autumn and winter which had just elapsed. He had been with them in Hungary, in Greece, and in Turkey, and had seemed equally at home in each country.

At Arlington Woods, Signor Baptisto had nothing to do but lounge away his time exactly as he pleased. He spent the day in idling and smoking; and he

consumed an enormous quantity of a very expensive kind of tobacco, which he rolled up into tiny paper cigarettes. He was not much liked by the other servants, for, although to his superiors he was polite, almost to servility, he was treacherous and reserved in his manner to his inferiors.

Philip Howland was the only person with whom he associated, and even with him he was rarely seen in conversation.

In his bed-chamber there were several curiously carved wooden coffers, secured with iron locks, and it was reported in the household that Signor Baptisto was a miser, and immensely rich, and that he kept his money in these coffers. So Philip Howland, the confidential footman, and Signor Giovanni Baptisto, the Italian courier, were the favorite servants of her Grace, the Duchess of Arlington; and wherever Blanche Mortimer went, the shadow of one or other of these men fell darkly across her pathway.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE ACCUSATION.

PHYSICIANS and surgeons of high standing had been summoned from London to assist at the *accouchement* of Adela Mortimer, but when all danger was past, and the young mother was entirely restored to health and strength, Mr. Joseph Maldon, the Mildrington surgeon, was allowed to attend to the infant heir, who was a healthy and powerful child, and who promised to give very little trouble to those who reared him.

It was at this juncture that the two brothers met alone for the first time since the night of the murder in the Rue Gueneville.

But this time the meeting did not occur accidentally. It was brought about in the following manner.

The child, who had been christened Theobald Gerald, was now exactly three months old, within a week the same age as the infant son of Mrs. Maldon. The young surgeon had been summoned to prescribe for some very trifling infantine ailment. He had visited the baby's room, had talked to Adela Mortimer and to the two nurses who had been engaged to attend upon the infant heir, and had reassured them as to the trifling nature of the malady.

Having done this, he descended to the hall, that magnificent marble-paved entrance-hall, which was adorned with costly works of art collected in the cities where art is most highly cultivated.

As he was crossing this hall on his way to his horse, which was waiting for him before the marble portico, he was stopped by a servant, who handed him a card.

It was his brother's card, and upon the back of it a few words were written in pencil.

These words were written in Italian, and ran thus: —

"I want to speak to you. Wait for me beside the Black Pond, as you ride homewards. I will meet you there. — L. M."

"I was to wait for an answer, sir, if you please," the footman said.

"Tell Signor Malatesta that the answer is Yes," replied Joseph Maldon.

He mounted his horse, and rode slowly away in the cold March sunlight.

The nearest way from the duke's mansion to the town of Mildrington lay through the most unfrequented part of the park.

A narrow bridle-path led underneath the dark shadow of overarching trees to a lonely lodge, and a pair of iron gates which had grown rusty with disuse, and creaked with an ominous and horrible noise when they were opened.

This lonely lodge was inhabited by one of the duke's gamekeepers, and this unfrequented part of the park swarmed with game of all kinds.

Midway between the mansion and this lodge, there lay a sullen and stagnant pool of water, completely overshadowed by the trees which spread their branches above it, and commonly known as the Black Pond.

This water was reported to be of considerable depth, and a gamekeeper of the last duke's — a sullen and disa-

greeable man, who had quarrelled with his wife — had drowned himself in this pond, and the place, which was gloomy enough in itself, had a bad name among the superstitious country people in consequence of this event.

Joseph Maldon stopped his horse on the brink of this pool, and dismounted. He then tied the animal to the nearest tree, and waited patiently for the coming of his brother.

He had not long to wait; not more than ten minutes had passed when he heard the crackling of the underwood beneath the feet of the Italian.

Luigi Malatesta had approached the spot by a different pathway from that which the surgeon had taken.

"Well, my dear brother," said Joseph, with an undisguised sneer; "so, to-day, for the first time after the lapse of a year, you condescend to acknowledge relationship between us. I think I can understand the motive of this condescension. *You want me*, Luigi Malatesta!"

"It may be so," answered the Florentine, coldly, — "it may be so, Giuseppe. But you have no need to reproach me. But for me you would never have escaped from the city of Paris. You would have never left France, alive or dead."

"I do not understand you," said the surgeon, with affected indifference. But the sickly whiteness which overspread his face gave the lie to his words even while he spoke them.

"Yes, Giuseppe, you understand me well enough," answered the Italian, quietly; "but for me you would have been arrested and tried for the murder in the Rue Gueneville. I perjured myself to save my brother. It was I who threw the agents of Victor Canlot off the scent. It was I who gave an entirely false description of you, and thus baffled the cleverest police officer in Europe."

"If you did this," exclaimed Joseph, after a pause, "I thank you for it. I make no acknowledgments of guilt, remember; that which you are pleased to call a murder may have been no *murder*. But, in any case, I thank you *for the service you did me*. And now *tell me why do you remind me of this* after the lapse of a year? Is it not because you have now to demand a service at my hands?"

"It is."

"I thought as much," said Joseph Maldon; "let us hear the nature of that service."

Luigi Malatesta pointed to a fallen tree that lay beside the black and stagnant pool.

"Sit down," he said, "and listen to me."

Joseph obeyed, and the two men seated themselves side by side upon the fallen trunk.

"Giuseppe Malatesta," Luigi began, in a low voice, "if I were to talk to you of mercy and pity, of better feelings which struggle against the demon of relentless ambition, I very much doubt whether you would understand me."

"The question may be doubtful," answered Joseph, with the sneer which was common to him when he dropped the mask which he usually wore; "suppose you talk to me of my own interests; I shall be sure to understand you then."

"Be it so," returned the Florentine; "it shall be to your interest that I appeal. I suppose you know that the purpose of my life is a mighty one?"

"I have heard you say so."

"And that the scheme of my ambition is interwoven with yonder house?" He pointed to the proud battlements of the ducal mansion, which looked down from an eminence upon the spot where the two brothers were seated.

"I have always imagined as much," Joseph answered, coldly.

"What, then, if I tell you that an obstacle has arisen in the pathway of my proud ambition, — an obstacle which must be removed at any cost, at any hazard?"

"What is that obstacle?" asked Joseph Maldon, answering one question by another.

"A life, — a human life."

"And I suppose I am to remove that obstacle," returned Joseph, with a diabolical smile. "I must say that the proposal comes well from the gentleman who preached morality a year ago in the Rue Gueneville."

"Enough, Giuseppe," exclaimed Lui-

gi Malatesta; "you have told me to appeal only to your interest, and I will do so. The life which stands between me and a great inheritance is the life of an infant."

"And that infant is the child I was called to see this day?"

"It is."

"I thought so," answered Joseph Maldon, with a strange smile.

"That child must die," said Luigi; "I can give you nothing now, for I am poor. But when I grasp the inheritance which shall be mine, — which shall be mine, mark you, Giuseppe, — you shall claim from me a noble reward for your service."

"If the child dies?"

"Yes, if the child dies under your medical treatment." Joseph Maldon was silent for some moments.

"The promised reward is rather uncertain," he said. "How do I know that you will ever succeed to this vast inheritance? How do I know that this wild talk is not the raving of a monomaniac?"

"I tell you, Giuseppe, that it shall be mine," returned Luigi. "The duke is a childless man wedded to a wicked woman, who is in my power; the young heir is a convert to the Roman Catholic faith, and is wedded to a woman whom he does not love. *He* is in my power! This infant, this baby heir, is the only obstacle in my path. He must be removed!"

"He shall be removed; but only on one condition."

"Name it."

"Your signature of a bond, by which you promise to give me ten thousand pounds upon the day in which you succeed to the Arlington fortune."

"I agree to that condition."

"So be it, then," exclaimed Joseph Maldon; "it is, after all, only a speculation. The life of an infant against your clever brains, my revered brother."

"Hush, mocker, not another word. When do you see the child again?"

"To-morrow."

"Then to-morrow the bond shall be ready for you."

The two brothers parted by the brink of the still, black water. They parted beneath *the darkening* sky, loathing themselves, loathing each other; each with guilt and treachery in his heart.

. . . . . .

Three days afterwards, a terrible scene occurred at Arlington Woods.

The baby heir presumptive was dying. The mother knelt in a paroxysm of grief by the side of the couch upon which the infant lay. Theobald Mortimer paced up and down the elegant apartment, waiting for the coming of the medical man.

That medical man was the young surgeon of Mildrington, Joseph Maldon.

Telegraphic messages had been despatched to London for physicians of the highest repute; but this had only just been done, for the danger of the child had only lately been discovered by the nurses in attendance upon it.

In this crisis, Theobald Mortimer's breast was filled with ungovernable fury against the young surgeon, who had kept him in the dark as to the child's danger.

The surgeon was announced by one of the footmen, and in another moment the two young men, Theobald Mortimer and Joseph Maldon, stood face to face.

The father turned pale with fury upon the man whom he looked upon as the destroyer of his child.

"Why did you not tell me that the infant was in danger, Mr. Maldon?" he exclaimed. "You have trifled with the life of this beloved child. You have tampered with his safety. You have deceived those who love him; and, if anything happens to my infant son, I shall accuse you as his murderer."

Joseph Maldon's face grew ghastly pale, but he controlled himself by a powerful effort, and it was with perfect calmness, and with an air of offended pride, that he answered the angry father.

"You are hasty, Mr. Mortimer," he said; "when I left the child, I did not believe him to be in any danger, and I will venture to stand by my opinion in the presence of any physicians you may please to call in. I was very much grieved to hear downstairs that there had been a change for the worse; but I trust it may be found that your fears have been groundless."

There was something in the quiet dignity of his manner that disarmed the anger of Theobald Mortimer. He drew aside, and suffered the young surgeon to approach the bed.

Joseph Maldon stood by the side of the little couch, and gazed long and earnestly upon the sleeping infant.

As he gazed, a strange thought came into his head.

He was thinking that, but for a difference in the color of the eyes, his child and the baby heir exactly resembled each other.

This thought was succeeded by another,—a strange thought,—which brought a sinister smile to his thin lips.

"What if I were to prove even more clever than my ambitious brother?" he thought. "What if I were to secure this vast inheritance for myself?"

"Send for my medicine-chest," he cried, presently, turning to one of the nurses; "let a groom gallop to Mildrington as fast as his horse can go, and bring back my medicine-chest. The baby shall be cured before the London physicians can arrive."

It was so. Before nightfall the infant lay in a calm and peaceful sleep. Joseph Maldon had administered its medicines with his own hand, and he himself watched by the bedside while the baby slept.

Theobald Mortimer had apologized most earnestly for his violence, and had heartily thanked the young doctor for the attention that had restored his child.

Joseph Maldon smiled as he accepted those grateful thanks.

Luigi Malatesta inquired anxiously every hour as to the progress of the infant's illness. Nothing could be more natural than that the Florentine should seem concerned in a matter which had so great an influence upon the happiness of his late pupil. Theobald Mortimer and the young man thanked the Jesuit for his sympathy. Joseph Maldon did not once leave the infant during the long night of anxious watchfulness. The baby slept a healthy and peaceful sleep, very different from the fitful slumber in which he had lain upon the previous night, and the young doctor watched by the infant's couch.

It was in the dead of the night that the two brothers met, in the room occupied by the sick child.

Theobald and Adela had retired to rest, worn out with fatigue and anxiety.

The nurses also slept, and the clock over the chimney-piece had just chimed the quarter after three.

At this moment Luigi Malatesta stole softly into the room.

"Giuseppe," he said, in a low voice, as he approached the couch upon which the child lay, "they tell me that the infant is recovering."

"They speak the truth, then," answered Joseph, quietly; "he is recovering."

Luigi Malatesta looked earnestly at his brother's face, but Joseph met that earnest glance with a steady and dogged gaze.

"You have betrayed me, Giuseppe," said the Florentine.

"Not so," answered his brother, "but I have changed my mind, perhaps. It may be that the father's sorrow and the mother's anguish have moved my compassion, and that I have been unable to carry out the dark deed planned by your scheming brain."

Once more Luigi Malatesta looked at his brother, but this time an expression of unmitigated contempt curled his thin lip.

"I understand you, Giuseppe Malatesta," he said; "arch hypocrite and pretender, I understand you. You have some scheme of *your own* to accomplish, and you would sacrifice me to your own advancement. Do so, Giuseppe, but do it at your peril, for any battle between you and me shall be a desperate and a deadly one."

"I do not fear you," answered Joseph Maldon, coolly; "since the fortune of the Duke of Arlington is to be played for and won by the cleverest player, I choose to begin the game upon my own account. You would sacrifice the life of this child; but beware how you attempt to do so. You have shown me your cards, but I have kept mine dark. This infant's life," he added, pointing to the couch, with a sinster smile, "is my trump card!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE MIDNIGHT OPERATION.

NOTHING could exceed the attention which Joseph Maldon paid to his infant patient. The London physicians arrived at Arlington Woods, but they agreed that all had been done for the baby that skill and foresight could suggest.

They confessed that they were quite unable to discover the nature of the malady from which the child had suffered; but they declared that they could not leave him in better hands than in those of the young surgeon of Mildrington.

The effect of this decision may be easily imagined. Theobald Mortimer most heartily expressed his gratitude towards Joseph Maldon, and promised that he would never again doubt the young surgeon's skill.

The London physicians departed within a few hours of their arrival, leaving the field clear for the young plotter.

The two nurses who attended the baby heir had the reputation of being the most respectable and trustworthy of women. The head nurse was a prim dame of fifty years of age, who took upon her the authority of a queen in her realm, — the nursery. The second, or under nurse, was a pale-faced, weak-looking woman, of about forty, who seemed terribly afraid of her superior.

The elder was called Mrs. Palsome; the younger was usually addressed as Martha Dork.

In his attendance upon the infant, Joseph Maldon was thrown very much in contact with these two women.

He found Mrs. Palsome inclined to dispute his authority, and to set up her own medical knowledge against that of the doctor. Martha Dork, on the contrary, was submissive and obedient, and seemed to fear him almost as much as she did the head nurse.

The young surgeon almost lived at Arlington Woods during the illness of the baby, only going backwards and forwards once or twice a day to Mildrington to attend to his other patients, and to see his gentle young wife, who was wrapped up in her love of her infant son.

She sympathized with the young mother at Arlington Woods, and she readily resigned herself to the absence of the husband she loved, when she remembered that his presence was of use to the anxious watchers by the baby couch.

Upon the night after that in which the interview described in our last chapter took place between Joseph and his brother, Luigi Malatesta, the young surgeon sat once more by the side of the pretty couch upon which the infant slept.

It was a little after eleven o'clock. Theobald and Adela had retired to rest, and Mrs. Palsome had gone downstairs to take her supper in the house-keeper's room. She was generally rather inclined for a doze after this meal, which she always wound up with a stiff glass of brandy and water. Martha Dork sat near the foot of the bed, with her hands crossed meekly upon her lap, and her eyelids cast down.

The young surgeon watched this woman's face. She was not asleep; and he could see that every now and then her pale gray eyes glanced furtively towards him.

He sat for some minutes watching her earnestly in silence, and then he spoke.

"Have you been long a nurse, Mrs. Dork?" he asked.

The woman lifted her gray eyes, and looked at him half fearfully.

"There is something strange about this woman," Joseph thought, — "some mystery connected with the past, which makes her frightened. The woman has a secret."

He repeated his question in a friendly and familiar tone.

"How long have you been employed as a nurse, Mrs. Dork?" he said.

"A great many years, sir," she answered,— "ever since my poor husband died."

"And how many years ago did that happen?"

"Upwards of twenty, sir. I was married when I was only eighteen, and my husband died of consumption six months afterwards."

"Humph!" muttered Joseph Maldon, thoughtfully; "and what was your first place, Mrs. Dork?"

"My first place was as nurse to a lady who was travelling, sir. We started from London and went straight to Paris, and from Paris to Italy."

"Indeed! and what was the name of this lady?"

"She was the wife of a baronet, sir. Her name was Oswald."

Joseph Maldon had not once relaxed his watchfulness of the woman's face while he had asked these questions. He had seen her turn pale as she answered these inquiries.

"The mystery of this woman's life is connected with her first place," he thought. "Lady Oswald,—Lady Oswald,—surely I have heard that name before!"

He was silent for some moments before he addressed his companion again.

"I suppose you are pretty well paid for your services," he said, carelessly. "I dare say, now, you have managed to put away a tidy sum in some savings bank."

Martha Dork sighed as she shook her head.

"No, indeed, sir, I have saved nothing. I have a daughter to keep out of my wages,—a child who was born some months after my husband's death. She's not quite right in her mind, poor thing; and though she's close upon two-and-twenty years of age, she has to be looked after like a baby. It's as much as I can do to keep her, sir, considering that I'm sometimes out of a situation."

"To be sure, to be sure, Mrs. Dork," returned Joseph Maldon, kindly. "Life is hard enough for most of us; we've almost all our trials."

The woman sighed heavily. Joseph had quite expected the kind of answer which he had received to his last question, for he had observed that while Mrs. Palsome wore a rustling black silk gown, and an old-fashioned watch and seals at her side, Mrs. Dork was dressed in shabby and almost threadbare stuff, which was made the most of by the neatness of her plain linen collar and the exquisite purity of her small, Quaker-like cap.

"I was certain that she was poor," Joseph thought, "or else a miser. Either would have answered my purpose; but perhaps it is even better that it should be as it is."

The hands of the timepiece opposite to the bed pointed to half-past eleven. There was little more time left to the young surgeon for the accomplishment of the purpose which was in his mind.

"How long does Mrs. Palsome generally remain at supper?" he asked.

Martha Dork shrugged her shoulders.

"Mrs. Palsome takes her own time," she said; "she stays as long as she pleases, sometimes an hour, sometimes more."

"Good!" thought Joseph Maldon. "I shall have plenty of time."

After a few minutes he again addressed the under-nurse.

"You tell me that you are not rich, Mrs. Dork," he said, "and that you have need of money for the support of your daughter. If that be the case, you would, perhaps, be willing to do me a service, provided I paid you well for your trouble."

Martha Dork shook her head.

"That depends upon what kind of service you wanted, sir," she said, cautiously. "There are some things that are dangerous to do."

"Yes," answered Joseph Maldon, slowly; "such things as you did *when you were in the service of Lady Oswald.*"

The woman's pale complexion became of almost a livid hue as Joseph said this. He had but fired a random shot, but it had struck home.

"I thought so," he said to himself; "and I was right. I thought there was some guilty secret in this woman's life, and that it was connected with her first service."

Martha Dork looked at the surgeon, with unmitigated terror depicted in her face.

"Is it possible, sir," she said, "that you know anything about—"

She paused, as if almost afraid to utter the words that rose to her lips.

"I may, perhaps, know more than I may choose to repeat," Joseph said, carelessly. "No matter, Mrs. Dork, let the secrets of the past rest, and let

us talk of the present and of the future. The favor which I wish you to do for me is a very small one, although I am prepared to offer you a tolerably large price for doing it."

"What is it, sir?" asked the nurse, who had somewhat recovered from the state of agitation into which she had been driven.

"I will tell you," answered Joseph Maldon. "I am very much interested in the state of this child; but I do not feel myself in a position here to do him justice. There is something wrong in his throat, which I have not yet ventured to mention to his parents,—who, between you and me, Mrs. Dork, are silly people, ready to take fright at the slightest alarm. Mrs. Palsome seems a stupid old woman, or I might confide in her; and, in short, you, Mrs. Dork, appear to be the only sensible person to whom I can appeal."

"I'm sure you're very kind, sir," said Martha, with a feeble smile.

"And I do not think you will refuse to assist me," continued Joseph. "The disease in the throat is as yet very slight, but it may by and by become alarming. The only chance of a cure is by the performance of an operation. This operation I am determined to perform; but I wish it to be done without the knowledge of Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer, who would be needlessly alarmed if the subject were mentioned to them. Do you understand me, Mrs. Dork?"

"Not quite, sir," answered the woman, looking at him anxiously.

"I wish to take the child home, in order that I may perform the operation in my own surgery, where I shall have the help of my assistant; and I want you to aid me in carrying him away, and bring him back without the knowledge of any creature but yourself."

"It can't be done, sir," cried the terrified woman. "Take the little blessed dear away? Not for the wide world!"

"Not for fifty pounds, Mrs. Dork?" asked Joseph.

Martha Dork opened her pale gray eyes to their widest extent. Fifty pounds was a sum that in a life of labor and patience she had never been able to scrape together. Can it be wondered that the wretched woman was ready to yield to the temptation?

"But it would be found out, sir," she cried; "it would be found out, and I should lose my place and my character too. My place here will be worth fifty pounds a year to me."

"It will not be found out, Mrs. Dork, if you do as I tell you," the young surgeon answered, quietly. "Mrs. Palsome is a heavy sleeper, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, very heavy."

"I thought as much; nurses of her age are generally rather fond of a glass of port, or a tumbler of brandy and water," said Joseph. "Good! Mrs. Palsome sleeps heavily, and you and she have the nursery between you of a night. In the next room to this there is a half-glass door, which opens on a flight of steps leading down into the garden. It is now close upon twelve o'clock, it is therefore too late to act to-night; but think over what I have said to you, and if you choose to earn fifty pounds, manage so that Mrs. Palsome shall be in a comfortable slumber at twelve o'clock to-morrow night, and an hour later take the baby to the glass door in the next room. I will be outside at the top of the steps ready to receive him."

"But will you promise to bring him back safe and sound, sir?" asked Martha Dork; "and will you give me your word of honor that the operation you are going to perform is not a dangerous one?"

"I will give you my word of honor," answered Joseph Maldon; "and as you may wish for some security for the safety of your reward, if you do me this service, I will give five-and-twenty pounds to-night as an earnest of the other five-and-twenty, which I shall be ready to give you to-morrow night. Think over the matter, and, if you change your mind between this and to-morrow, you will only have to return me the money."

He took a morocco purse from his pocket, and handed a little packet of notes and gold to Martha Dork. Three crisp bank-notes for five pounds each, and ten golden sovereigns.

This young man had carefully stud-

ied the meaner attributes of human nature.

He felt sure that this woman, who had felt the sting of poverty, would never give up money which had once passed into her possession.

"She will keep the money," he thought, "and she will let me have the child."

Mrs. Palsome entered the room as he was thinking this. He gave her a few directions as to the treatment of the infant, and then left her. He saw her yawn wearily as he quitted the room, and he felt sure that the child would be left every night to the sole care of Martha Dork.

He called early the next day, and found that the infant was still progressing favorably. Mrs. Dork contrived to open the door for him as he left the child's apartments.

"Well, Mrs. Dork," he whispered, "which is it to be? Are you to return me the money, or am I to give you the other five-and-twenty?"

"I will bring the child to the half-glass door to-night, sir," answered Martha Dork, glancing fearfully behind her as she spoke.

"At one o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! I will be ready to receive him. Be sure you wrap him up well, and get him sound asleep, if you can, before I come for him."

"I'll try, sir."

Joseph Maldon left the house. He had not seen his brother since the night of their interview. There was war between them, — deadly hate and determined warfare; and Joseph felt that, base and unscrupulous as he was, he had to struggle with an intellect that was stronger than his own. He galloped home to Mildrington. The surgeon's house was one of the prettiest in the little country town, and Lilian was sitting, with her baby in her arms, at one of the plate-glass windows that looked towards the street. She was watching for the approach of the husband she loved, — the man whose presence always brought sunshine to her quiet home.

Could she have fathomed the dark recesses of this man's soul, what would have been her anguish at beholding the wretch whom she so dearly loved! Would she have been able to wean her heart from him? or would a woman's devotion have been proof even against that dreadful knowledge?

She rose to greet him, dancing the baby in her arms. He took the child from her, and looked long and earnestly into the infant face. There was little of a father's loving gaze in that anxious scrutiny, but Lilian did not see the cold, hard look with which her husband regarded his child.

But he looked so long that she grew alarmed, and looked at him with a glance of terror.

"Is anything the matter, Joseph?" she said.

"Yes, Lilian," he answered, gravely; "this child is ill, and must have change of air. Don't you see how dull and languid he looks?"

"No, indeed, dearest. I was thinking just before you came in that he was as lively as a little bird. Surely he can't be ill."

"He *is* ill, Lilian," returned Joseph Maldon, decisively; "what should you know about it? The baby is ill, and nothing but change of air will bring him round. I know some people who live at a place called Pringham, in North Wales, a village situated upon the coast. The air of the place is celebrated for its purity; you shall take the baby there for a few months."

"So far, Joseph!" exclaimed Lilian. "I could never go so far away from you."

"Bah, child!" muttered the young surgeon; "you would surely do as much to save the infant's life."

"To save his life, dear? Yes, indeed, I would do anything for that."

The gentle wife submitted to her husband's wish, and it was agreed that she should start early the next morning, with the child and nurse, on her way to North Wales.

Lilian spent the rest of the day in making her preparations for this sudden journey, but in the evening she and Joseph supped comfortably together in their pleasant little sitting-room. The baby lay asleep in a pretty bassinet at its mother's feet. Joseph Maldon in-

sisted on his wife's drinking some wine with him upon this occasion. He was peculiarly attentive and kind to her. He himself decanted the wine and filled her glass.

"The servants have gone to bed, Lilian, — have they not?" he asked.

"Yes, dear," answered the young wife; "there is no one up but ourselves. We are very late, you know, to-night; it is getting on for twelve o'clock."

"You must be tired, Lilian," said the surgeon; "you are not accustomed to such late hours."

"I am very tired, dear," she replied, "and this wine seems to make me drowsy."

Joseph Maldon smiled. He insisted on filling his wife's glass a second time, but he went to the little sideboard to fill it. She drank according to his wish, and three minutes afterwards her head fell back upon the cushions of her chair.

She slept the heavy sleep which is the result of a powerful opiate.

He took her in his arms, and carried her to a sofa near the fire. Then, lifting the baby from its cradle, he poured a few drops out of a small vial into the infant's mouth.

He kept the key of his little stable himself. He entered this stable, and led out his horse, which had been standing saddled and bridled. He sprang lightly upon the animal's back, and started at a walking pace along the quiet street.

But he soon increased his pace as he approached the open country, and started off at a gallop towards Arlington Woods.

He reached the park before one o'clock, and stopped at about a hundred yards from the house.

Here he dismounted, and tied his horse to a tree. Then with a cautious footfall he approached the flight of steps at the top of which he was to meet Martha Dork.

He tapped lightly at the half-glass door, and in two minutes it was opened by the nurse, who held the baby heir in her arms.

"Is he well wrapped up?" the surgeon asked.

"Yes, he will take no cold," answered Martha.

"Good!" exclaimed Joseph Maldon; "you have managed the business well, Mrs. Dork. In a couple of hours you may expect me back."

"The operation will not take long, then?"

"No, it is a very brief one."

The surgeon descended the steps, carrying the child carefully in his arms.

Mrs. Dork had locked the door of the nursery, and she had also turned the key of that apartment in which Mrs. Palsome slept, though she had very little fear of the head nurse awaking after her heavy supper and comfortable glass.

But, in spite of this, Martha Dork could not help feeling terribly uneasy during the absence of the child. She sat by the empty couch counting the moments, and watching eagerly for Joseph's return.

She knew that she had done wrong in trusting the baby heir — the cherished hope of a doting mother and father — into the hands of a stranger, and she was oppressed with vague and strange fears that she could hardly understand.

But Joseph Maldon kept his promise. The clock upon the chimney-piece had not long struck three when Martha Dork heard the signal once more. She flew to the adjoining chamber, opened the half-glass door, and received the child in her arms.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, — "thank Heaven, he is safe!"

"Safe!" echoed Joseph Maldon, as he followed her into the room; "did you think, then, that any harm would happen to him?"

"No, sir, — no," murmured Mrs. Dork, humbly; "I knew you'd take care of him, of course, sir; but I couldn't help feeling uncomfortable while he was away."

Joseph Maldon took a small packet of notes from his purse, and handed it to the nurse.

"There is the recompense for your anxiety," he said, quietly; "put the child back into his bed, and see that he is well cared for."

He descended the steps, and disappeared amongst the shrubberied pathways of the garden.

Adela Mortimer was a tender and a loving mother, and she had insisted upon nursing her own child. Early the next morning the baby was taken to her, and she sat in an easy-chair in her luxurious dressing-room, wrapped in a morning robe of muslin and lace, and with the baby's face nestled lovingly upon her bosom.

Her husband stood near her, watching his infant son. Suddenly she lifted her head, which had been bent over the child's face, and uttered an exclamation of alarm.

"What is the matter, dearest?" asked Theobald.

"The baby is not so well, Theo," she exclaimed. "I'm sure that he has changed since last night. His face seems thinner, and his eyes are not so bright and dark a blue. Send for Mr. Maldon, directly, Theo; I'm sure the darling is worse."

Theobald rang the bell immediately.

"I will send for Maldon, if you like, my dear," he said; "but the little fellow seems to me to be bright and lively enough."

"Yes, to you, Theo, perhaps," answered Adela, "but not to me. A father's eyes may be deceived, but not a mother's. My pet has changed since last night."

Joseph Maldon came; but he smiled at the fears of the anxious mother, and declared that the child was going on as well as ever.

"My own little fellow is not very well, Mrs. Mortimer," he said, after attending to the infant heir. "I have sent him off to the sea-side with his mother this morning."

Luigi Malatesta was present when the surgeon said this.

He looked up with a singular expression, and the eyes of the two brothers met.

The glance of the younger expressed nothing but defiance, but that of the elder seemed to say:—

"*I understand you now, Giuseppe Malatesta.*"

CHAPTER XLV.

THE GIPSY'S PROPHECY.

Nearly two months after this scene at Arlington Woods, the duke and duchess were established for the season in their superb mansion in Cavendish Square.

Once more Blanche Mortimer was one of the acknowledged leaders of the fashion, one of the beauties most admired at every ball and fête. Her wealth, her rank, her loveliness,—all contributed to her power. She was one of the queens of that gay world in which she lived. There were few who had not cause to envy her. There were only two or three people who ever doubted that the Duchess of Arlington was the happiest as well as the loveliest of women.

The duke had almost forgotten that strange and shadowy form which had appeared to him in St. George's Church upon the eve of his marriage. He was happy in the society of the woman he loved; he was proud of her; he was blest in the fond belief that she returned his devoted affection.

What would have been his feelings had he known that this woman was utterly incapable of loving any human being; that she was cold, calculating, and pitiless; and that the purest sentiment she had ever felt had been the love which she had coldly sacrificed upon the shrine of her ambition!

In the world of fashion Blanche Mortimer often met with one whose presence always struck a thrill of terror to her inmost soul. She often met with Percival Holmwood, the elegant young millionnaire, whose boundless wealth had obtained for him admission to all those aristocratic mansions at which the duke and duchess visited.

They met, but they met as strangers. No one could have guessed the strange link which bound them,—a link of terror upon her side; upon his the iron chain of vengeance.

Let us watch the beautiful duchess at one of the most brilliant amusements of the London season.

It is late in May, and half England seems to be congregated upon the green

turf of Epsom Downs, to witness the favorite sport of the Englishman. It is the Derby day, and the great race has not yet been run.

It is impossible to see the color of the grass, so dense is the crowd which covers the high ground about the race-course, stretching even down into the hollow by Tatterham Corner.

The air is noisy with the sounds of wild merriment and reckless jollity. Ethiopian serenaders, Punch and Judy, children on stilts, tumblers, conjurers, dancers, gipsies, — all crowd about the carriages, eager to get some of the money, which, upon this day, is so freely and bountifully scattered.

Champagne corks are flying in every direction, and hampers are being unpacked; busy servants are moving here and there with raised pies, lobster salads, soda-water, knives and forks, and all the other requisites for a picnic luncheon.

But suddenly there is a pause; a bell rings, and in a moment every creature is on the alert; opera glasses are lifted to lovely eyes, and every head is turned rapidly in one direction.

The great race has begun.

From that moment every unit of that mighty mass is breathless with expectancy. Then shouts arise, louder and louder until they swell into one deep, tumultuous roar as of a million voices.

The horses fly past the stand, the gay colors of the jockies' satin jackets glittering in the sunshine.

Then all is over. The numbers fly up, the great event of the day is decided, and many an unhappy wretch creeps off, white and terror-stricken, to regret the money he has lost, — money which, perhaps, was not his own, — money which may have been stolen from his master's till,— *borrowed*, as the unhappy dupe thought when he took it; stolen, as he knows now.

But to the Duchess of Arlington it could be of very little consequence what horse was a winner in the great race. She had watched it eagerly through her glass, and she still held her glass to her eyes and looked towards the *stand, though* the race was over.

A group of gay admirers were clustered round her carriage, delighted to have the opportunity of saying a few words to her, delighted more to get a random glance from her lovely eyes.

The duke was not among them, for he had strolled away to the noblemen's stand, to talk to some old acquaintance.

But amongst that group was one whose presence was always hateful to Blanche Mortimer. Percival Holmwood leaned with his elbow upon the door of the elegant landau, while a couple of aristocratic Frenchmen, whom the duchess had known in Paris, lingered near the carriage.

Blanche Mortimer had, as we know, the most wonderful control over her own motives. It was very rarely that she betrayed herself, and it was only under the influence of some most terrible excitement.

To-day she was perfectly at her ease. She talked gayly to the young millionnaire, and, as he watched her beautiful face, he wondered at the effrontery of the mask which concealed the black and guilty heart beneath it.

"How different to Aurora!" he thought, — "how different to my lovely and innocent Aurora, whose every glance betrays some kind feeling; whose lips have never uttered an untruth!"

As he was talking to the duchess, a couple of gipsies approached the carriage, and one, the younger and handsomer of the two, begged to be allowed to tell her fortune.

"No, no," exclaimed Blanche, laughing; "my fortune has been known to me a long time, — has it not, Mr. Holmwood?"

"Not all of it, perhaps, your Grace," Percival answered, with a strange smile.

"You hear, pretty lady!" cried the gipsy; "the gentleman says your fortune's not all told. Let me tell you the rest. Do, pretty lady; do let the poor gipsy tell you the rest."

"As you please," answered the duchess, with a silvery laugh; "I do not put much confidence in your power of foretelling the future, but you shall tell me what you can."

She drew off her glove, and held out her white and jewelled hand, which the gipsy took in her own brown palm.

At this moment the duke returned to the carriage, but he stopped a little way behind the gipsy to watch this scene.

He watched it with a smile, fearful to interrupt the woman by speaking.

The gipsy uttered a few of the commonplace and meaningless prophecies usual to her race.

"You have wealth as well as beauty, my lady," she said, as she examined the small, rosy-tinted palm; "but that's easy to see. You've those that love you true and dear, lady, and worship the ground you walk on; but you've those that hate you, too, lady, and that you've need to beware of, for they wish you ill. It's a pretty hand, my lady, almost as small as a child's, but there's a many lines on it, a many lines, — there's one here that I can't quite make out —"

The woman stopped abruptly, and, bending over the hand of the duchess, fixed a scrutinizing gaze upon that rosy palm.

But suddenly she dropped it as if she had been stung, and uttered a suppressed cry.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed the duchess, turning pale.

"Nothing, lady, nothing," answered the woman, in evident confusion; — "nothing, only I must be going. I mustn't stay here, or my companions will be seeking for me."

The fortune-teller did not even remain to get the golden reward the duchess had offered her. She dropped a courtesy, and hurried away into the thick of the crowd beyond the treble rank of carriages.

But she was followed by the duke, who pursued her through that motley crowd, and caught her by the arm at some distance from the carriage.

"What was that which frightened you upon that lady's hand?" he asked, breathlessly.

"A mark, sir, — a line I didn't like."

"What was it?"

"*I can't* tell you, sir! I can't, *indeed!*"

shall, woman!" the duke answered, almost fiercely. "See! here is a ten-pound note: I will give you that if you will answer my question."

The woman's eyes lit up at the sight of the money. She snatched it from the duke's hand.

"The line upon the lady's hand was the line of MURDER," she whispered, close in his ear; and, before he could ask another question, she had disappeared amongst the crowd.

CHAPTER XLVI.

LILIAN'S NEW HOME.

EARLY upon the morning after the night upon which Joseph Maldon had secretly visited Arlington Woods, with the connivance of the nurse, Martha Dork, Lilian and her baby, with its young attendant,—a nurse-girl who had been hired in the town of Mildrington, —left home upon a hurried journey.

But they did not go to North Wales, as the young surgeon had proposed; for a letter had arrived only that morning from Andrew Burton, in which the merchant declared that he was very ill, and that he wished much to see his daughter Lilian without delay. The young girl was too tender-hearted and affectionate not to be immediately anxious to comply with the sick man's request, and she appealed to Joseph for advice.

"The matter can be managed easily enough, my dear," her husband said; "the air in the neighborhood of Fulham is very good, and will perhaps afford all the change the child requires. I will take you up to town, and get you some comfortable lodging near North Villa, and you will thus be able to see as much of your father as you like."

"And you think that change will be sufficient for the child, dear?"

"Yes, quite sufficient."

The young couple were seated at breakfast, and the baby lay in its cradle by the mother's side.

She bent over the pretty lace-curtained bassinet, and took the child upon her knee. He had just awoke, and had opened his large blue eyes to their fullest extent.

"This is the first time my darling has awoke since last night," Lilian said. "I have been almost alarmed, as I never knew him to sleep so long before."

She rocked the child upon her breast, but suddenly she looked up, with an expression of alarm.

"Joseph," she exclaimed, "this is not my child!"

The surgeon bit his lip, but he answered her with a careless laugh.

"Not your child, Lilian!" he said; "you must be dreaming, surely. Whose child should it be, if it is not yours?"

"I don't know — I don't know," she cried, in a tone of utter bewilderment; "but I can only tell that he is changed. I cannot say in what the difference consists; but the face of this baby seems different to the face I bent over last night."

"The fairies must have changed him, then, in that case, my dear," answered Joseph Maldon, carelessly. "You say that you are certain there is a difference between the child you hushed asleep last night and the child who is ow in your arms?"

"Yes — yes."

nd yet you have never left the — in which the child has lain. You remember how you dropped off to sleep last night at the supper-table. I removed you to the sofa. You remember what occurred when you awoke?"

"Yes," answered Lilian; "the lamp was still burning, you were seated by the fire smoking your cigar, and the baby was asleep in his cradle."

"Certainly," returned Joseph; "and immediately afterwards we carried the cradle into your bedroom, where you lay awake watching the child for the best part of the night, as you were uneasy at his sleeping so long."

"Yes, Joseph — yes, I remember all this."

"Very well, my foolish Lilian. When, pray, could the fairies or the conspirators whom you suspect have changed your baby?"

"Were you with me *all* the time that I was asleep, Joseph?" asked the young wife.

"Yes," answered the surgeon, unhesitatingly; "all the time."

"And how long do you think I slept?"

"For the best part of an hour, perhaps, — no more."

Both these last replies were, as the reader knows, unblushing falsehoods.

Lilian had slept for nearly five hours under the influence of the narcotic given to her by her husband; but the practised chemist had taken care to put back the hands of the little clock over the parlor mantel-piece, and those hands had only pointed to a quarter to one when his wife awoke, though it was in reality four o'clock.

Lilian remembered glancing at the clock, as her husband spoke, and she had no thought of doubting his word.

"You did not believe me yesterday, Lilian," said Joseph, after a brief pause, "when I told you that the child was altered. My practised eye saw the change in him quicker than yours could perceive it. However, there is no cause for alarm, my dear; a few weeks' change of air will bring him completely round, for he is a strong, healthy child, and I think Brompton air will be as advantageous as any other. I will go out and make two or three important visits, and will come home in time to take you to London by the afternoon train."

Joseph Maldon kept his word, and at two o'clock in the afternoon the little party started from the Mildrington station. They reached London by four, took a cab, and drove down to North Villa, where they were admitted by the old woman who kept guard over that dreary habitation.

Lilian was very anxious to see her father. Little love as he had ever shown for his only child, her affectionate heart yearned towards him in his hour of sickness and sorrow.

"He has always chilled my heart by his cold sternness, Joseph," she said, as she sat with her husband in the dark sitting-room, waiting for permission to ascend to her father's apartment; "but surely he will be glad to have me near him now. We have such need of affection in the day of sickness."

The nursemaid and baby had been taken charge of by the old woman, who led the girl into the kitchen, where

there was a fire. There was none in the sitting-room, and Lilian shivered as she sat in the comfortless chamber.

The old woman reappeared presently.

"You may come upstairs now," she said. "He's well enough to see you; but he's been rare and bad, I can tell you; and, what's more, it strikes me he'll never be much better again."

"Does the doctor say so?" asked Lilian, anxiously.

"Yes, he do, miss, — beggin' your pardon, — ma'am, as I should say; and, what's more, your father's face says so plainer than ever the doctor can speak. Master was took with another fit just like the one he had when you brought him home that time, sir," said the old woman, addressing Joseph, "and he's never been able to hold his head up since. He's been layin' on his bed ever since, and we've had to do for him just like a baby; but yesterday he picked up a bit, and insisted upon it as he could write a letter; and, as there was no goin' agen him, me and the other woman that's nussin' him gave way, and he writ that letter to you, ma'am. He wouldn't trust nobody else to write it, for he's regular untrustful of every one."

"My poor father!" murmured Lilian; "my poor father! let me go to him immediately."

She hurried up the dreary staircase, up and down which she had gone so often in her solitary girlhood.

She entered the large and handsomely furnished, though gloomy, chamber of the sick man.

Joseph Maldon followed close behind her.

At the sight of his daughter the invalid uttered an exclamation of joy, but his countenance changed as he perceived her husband, and he sank back upon the pillows which supported him.

The merchant had much changed in the twelvemonth which had passed since last we saw him.

His face was shrunken, and was of the cadaverous white peculiar to sickness. His form was wasted like his face, and he was as feeble as a child.

A sick-nurse sat near the bed, but Andrew Burton's wretched mad wife was nowhere to be seen. She was not admitted to that sick-chamber, for it was felt that her presence could only worry and distract the sick man.

Lilian seated herself by the bedside. She was shocked to see the change in her father.

"Why did you not come alone, Lilian?" said the invalid. "I thought you would have come alone."

He said this in a cautious whisper, only loud enough for his daughter to hear, and he hushed her with his finger on his lip as she was about to answer him.

Joseph Maldon advanced to the bed.

"I am sorry to see you so ill, sir," he said.

He stretched out his hand as he spoke; but Andrew Burton did not take it.

"Are you going to take Lilian back to Kent to-night?" he asked.

"No, my dear father," exclaimed Lilian, "I am going to stay near you. Joseph is going to take a lodging for me within a short distance of this house."

A sickly gleam of satisfaction stole over the countenance of the invalid, but he made no remark.

"I am drowsy," he said, after a long pause; "drowsy and stupid sometimes. I scarcely know where I am, or what I am talking about."

He seemed to sink into a doze a few minutes after this, but Lilian kept her place by his pillow.

"Perhaps you would like to stay with your father while I go to look for a lodging, Lilian?" Joseph said.

"Yes, yes, I will stay, if you please."

"But you must promise not to talk to him. He must not be agitated by conversation."

"I will be as silent as a statue," answered Lilian.

Joseph Maldon left the room softly. The shadows of evening were falling, and darkening the dismal garden outside the windows; but Lilian sat patiently by the sick man's side, forgetful even of her child in her anxiety about her father. She had sat thus for about a quarter of an hour after Joseph's departure, when the invalid suddenly awoke from his doze, and looked fearfully and almost wildly around him.

"Is he gone?" he cried, "or is he here still? Don't deceive me, whatever you do! Tell me, is he here still?"

"Who do you mean, dearest father?" Lilian asked, wonderingly.

"Who should I mean, child, but your husband?" cried the sick man; "who should I mean but your husband, — your lawful husband, — the deeper the shame to those who let him be so for their own wicked purposes. Where is he?"

"If you mean Joseph, he is gone, father," answered Lilian; "but why do you say such things of him? He is my good and true husband, and I married him of my own free will. I married him because I loved him, father."

"Ah, you don't know, child, — you don't know," the invalid cried, groaning aloud, as if in utter despair.

"I don't know what, dear father?" asked Lilian.

"You don't know the secrets, child, — the secrets. Behind the curtain of his outer self every man hides some secret or other. I will tell you the secrets of your husband before I die — before I die; and then you will know the reason that I say, 'Shame upon him who let you go with Joseph Maldon to the altar!'"

Lilian fully believed that her father's mind was wandering. She attached no importance to his words. She knew that in fever and delirium people will often mistake their best friends for their most deadly enemies. She tried to soothe him, but she asked him no questions. He lay silent for some minutes, exhausted by the excitement with which he had spoken, but presently he asked, abruptly, —

"Where is the woman who nurses me?"

"Here I am, sir," answered the nurse, who was a motherly-looking woman; "here I am, sir, close beside you, and ready to wait upon you when you want me."

"You saw the man who came into the room just now?"

"Your son-in-law, sir?"

"Yes, my son-in-law. You saw him, — didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, I did," answered the woman; "and a very nice, kind-spoken gentleman he seemed."

"Listen to me!" exclaimed Andrew Burton, fiercely. "If that man comes into this room while I lie here, let him touch nothing, — not a glass, not a bottle, not so much as a cup of water. Watch him, and watch him closely, for he is dangerous. If he has the chance he will poison me!"

"Father!" cried Lilian, indignantly, "how can you say such a wicked thing?"

The nurse put her finger on her lip.

"Hush, miss!" she said, "your poor papa is delirious."

"No," exclaimed Andrew Burton, with convulsive energy, "I am not delirious; I swear that I speak the solemn truth. Joseph Maldon is a poisoner!"

Lilian remained silent. She felt that the woman must be right, and that her father's brain must be indeed terribly disordered.

While this scene was taking place, Joseph Maldon was searching the neighborhood of Walham Green for a comfortable lodging for his wife. The young surgeon had no idea of spending much money upon the wife who had brought him a fortune. He wished to secure a lodging that would cost very little money, and he wished also to find as obscure a neighborhood as could be found so near London.

He had his own reasons for wishing that his wife and the infant with her should be placed entirely out of the reach of the family at Arlington Woods.

For this reason he had spread the report that Lilian and the child had started for North Wales.

The neighborhood of Walham Green is, perhaps, one of the quietest neighborhoods about London; and in a back road, leading past market-gardens and solitary villas, Joseph Maldon stopped to observe a row of small shops.

The shop at the corner of the row was of that kind that is very often called a "general" shop. Grocery, stationery, fancy goods, ironmongery, and, above all, a very handsome display of cutlery, adorned the window, while over the door was painted the name of "John Primmins, licensed dealer in

tea, snuff, tobacco, etc., etc." Behind one of the brightly polished panes of glass in the window hung a placard, announcing that furnished lodgings were to be let to a gentleman or lady.

Everything about the house and shop looked peculiarly bright and clean.

Joseph Maldon was attracted by this. He opened the little half-glass door of the shop and entered.

The Cheap Jack was standing behind the counter, weighing an ounce of tea for an urchin of about seven years old.

Our old friend had yielded to the solicitations of Percival Holmwood, and had consented to abandon his wandering life and to withdraw Aurora from her theatrical avocations.

But with the sturdy pride and honest independence peculiar to him, he had refused to accept one shilling from the young millionnaire, and had purchased the stock in trade and good-will of this little shop out of his own savings.

He had added his own stock in trade to the original stock of the small chandler who had sold him the business, and had thus given a very gorgeous appearance to his shop window.

His lively manners, and the complimentary language in which he addressed his customers, had made him a great favorite in the neighborhood, and his business answered almost as well as it had done in the old days when he and Aurora had wandered about the country in the van.

Mr. Primmins looked up as Joseph Maldon entered, and was surprised to see a gentleman of a very different appearance to that of the generality of his customers.

"What did you please to want, sir?" he said. "Stand out of the way, my little dear, and let me hear what the gentleman may please to want. If it's anythink in the Sheffield cutlery way, sir, you won't get better served at any shop in England; not at the largest hemporium as is. If it's anythink in the jewellery line, light and fancy, warranted real precious stones, and the best imitation gold, I can serve you well, sir, and serve you truly, if—"

"Stop, stop, my good man," exclaimed Joseph, eager to interrupt the *Cheap Jack's eloquence,* "you're quite mistaken. I want nothing of this kind. I see that you have lodgings to let, and I wish to ascertain if they would suit my wife."

"Suit her!" cried John Primmins. "Why, if she was the Hempress of Roosia, which, judging from her husband's aristocratic appearance, she might be, they'd suit her, and suit her well."

"Aurora!"

He called to his adopted daughter, and a moment afterwards the door between the shop and the parlor opened, and the young girl stood upon the threshold. Joseph Maldon started at the sight of the beautiful face that met his gaze.

"Is this young lady your daughter?" he asked.

"She's my adopted daughter," answered John. "She may be the heiress of a *dook* for aught I know; but if she was twenty times my child she couldn't be dearer to me nor better to me than she is. The gentleman wants to see the lodgings, Aurora," he added, turning to his *protegée*.

The young girl led the way to the room over the shop, which was prettily furnished and exquisitely neat and clean, like everything else in the small establishment.

Opening out of this room there was a pretty bed-chamber, in which Aurora said a second bed could be placed for the nursemaid.

The rent she asked was moderate, and the bargain was quickly settled.

How little did Aurora know that a wonder-working and mysterious Providence had brought this man across her pathway, and that through such humble means her own destiny was to be accomplished!

Joseph Maldon went away to fetch his wife, and Aurora ran down to the shop to talk to her adopted father.

"We shall be quite rich, dear father," she said, gayly. "This lady is to give us a pound a week for the rooms, and that, added to the money you make by the business, will render us people of fortune. But I hope the lady will be agreeable and inclined to be sociable with us. What shall we do if she's reserved and haughty?"

"Haughty to you, my precious pet!" exclaimed Mr. Primmins; "I should like to see her at it, that's all; I'd give her notice, and make her march out of these premises in double-quick time, if she came any of those games with you."

Aurora ran away to consult Priscilla—an elderly woman who waited upon the Cheap Jack and his adopted child—about the reception of the new lodger. The young girl assisted to arrange the rooms with her own delicate hands, and gave them a simple grace and beauty which could never have been bestowed upon them by a ruder touch.

It was dark, and the candles were lighted, when Lilian and her maid arrived. Aurora was delighted with the appearance of the young wife. She conducted the nursemaid and baby into the bed-chamber, where a fire had been lighted for the comfort of the child, and then returned to the sitting-room with Lilian.

Priscilla brought the trunks and carpet-bags into the apartment, and Mr. Primmins presented himself to welcome the new inmate beneath his roof.

Lilian was fascinated by the beauty and amiability of Aurora.

"How happy I shall be here!" she cried. "You will be a companion, a sister, to me,—will you not, dear girl?" she added, embracing Aurora. "I have never had a sister, and my life has been a very lonely one."

"Then you'll just suit her, mum," exclaimed Mr. Primmins, "for my poor dear has been an adopted child, and she's never had no brothers nor sisters, nor fathers nor mothers, except me; and it aint to be expected as I could be all to her, unless I was like one of my own hundred-bladed Sheffield knives, which is a corkscrew, and a gimblet, and a toothpick, and a fruit-knife all in one. Lor' bless you, mum!" added the Cheap Jack, enthusiastically, "if you'll only be a friend to my little beauty here, you may have the lodgings for nothin', and I shall think it a favor, your stoppin' in 'em."

Joseph Maldon had parted with his wife at the door of her new lodging. He took a cab and returned to London, where he drove to the railway-station, which he reached in time to catch the mail-train for Mildrington.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE MAD-HOUSE.

The companionship of Aurora was a constant source of happiness to the young wife. But for this companionship Lilian would have been very sorrowful and heavy-hearted in the absence of the husband she loved; but Mr. Primmins' adopted child comforted her by such tender sympathy as an affectionate sister might have given, and the days passed peacefully, and almost joyously, in the humble household.

The presence of the child was a pleasure to evey one; and even Mr. John Primmins learned to nurse the baby, who was a bright, merry-hearted, laughing child, always ready to smile and crow in answer to every loving word addressed to him.

Percival Holmwood, the young millionnaire, was a frequent visitor at Walham Green. In the world, the elegant young man was noted for his eccentric manners, his satirical speeches, his mocking laughter at all the passing follies of the day; but here he was natural and unaffected, sometimes joyous, sometimes melancholy, but always his honest, unpretending self.

He never alluded to the fancied relationship between himself and Aurora; but there was a brotherly familiarity, mingled with a gentle, half-reverential tenderness in his manner, that showed he still believed the young nameless foundling to be his sister.

Did Aurora believe this? Did she think that Percival Holmwood was indeed her brother? No; she did not, she could not, think it. She had tried to do so, she had tried to realize the idea that she had a holy claim upon his tenderness, a sacred title to his affection; but she could not.

"I do not love him," she thought. "If he were my brother, I should surely cling to him with all a sister's love."

It was thus she argued; and she had

good reason to do so, for there was something hidden deep in the inmost recesses of her pure heart which was not a sisterly affection for the young millionnaire.

She trembled at the sound of his footfall, when he crossed the little shop and entered the pretty parlor, in which she sat at her music or needlework. She trembled at the sound of that familiar footstep. Her cheek paled as he approached her; her voice fell as she addressed him.

In all things she sympathized with him. If he was sad, she, too, was sorrowful; and in his hours of merriment, her spirits rose wild and joyous, as the harmonious warblings of a forest bird.

Hers was indeed no sisterly affection; it was something more.

She had told Lilian all that she was at liberty to reveal of her own history and of Percival's, and they had talked seriously and earnestly upon the subject.

"I cannot believe that you and Mr. Holmwood are brother and sister," Lilian said, "for there is no likeness between you; and however dissimilar features and complexion may be, there is generally some resemblance of expression between those who are so nearly related."

"And you can trace no resemblance between us?" asked Aurora.

"Not the slightest."

"Yet Mr. Holmwood seems to be so very positive upon the subject," Aurora urged.

"Because he has never considered it seriously. He stood alone in the world, and he was pleased to think that he had found a sister. It is very easy to believe that which we wish to believe."

"But the portrait of his mother,—that portrait which so strongly resembles me."

"The resemblance may be accidental," answered Lilian; "nay, more, how do you know that the portrait really is that of Mr. Holmwood's mother? Those who gave him the miniature may have been mistaken."

Aurora sighed as her friend said this.

"What a mystery!" she exclaimed; "how dark and mysterious it all is!"

"*Yes, dearest girl,*" answered Lilian, "but when you least expect it this dark mystery may be unravelled."

She little knew how soon her words were to be fulfilled. She little knew that she herself was to be the instrument through which the clue to that double mystery would be discovered.

Poor Lilian had need of kind and devoted friends to support her in her hour of trial, for all things seemed cruelly dark and gloomy at North Villa. Andrew Burton was still confined to his chamber. He was no longer delirious, but he was a feeble old man, deprived of the use of his limbs, dependent upon the services of others, helpless and submissive.

In this state he clung to his daughter. He had been no loving father, as we know. He had been reserved and gloomy, and had frozen the warm current of affection in the innocent heart of his only child. But in this hour of sickness and sorrow he turned to her for comfort, and he never turned to her in vain. She spent a great part of every day in his gloomy chamber, talking to him, reading to him, tending on him, with patient and untiring devotion.

She had her mother also to attend to; but Mrs. Burton was now hopelessly and incurably mad; nay, more, she was subject at times to sudden fits of violence, and the doctors never allowed her daughter to remain long with her.

But upon one occasion Lilian's gentle heart experienced a cruel shock.

Upon one of her daily visits to North Villa, she was going to her mother's room, after having watched her father fall into a calm and peaceful sleep, when she was stopped by the family doctor, who met her half-way in the gloomy corridor that led from her father's room to that occupied by his unhappy wife.

"You cannot see your mother to-day, Mrs. Maldon," the doctor said.

"Why not?"

"Because she has gone."

"Gone! Where?" exclaimed Lilian.

"I regret to say that we have been compelled to remove her to a private asylum at Wandsworth. We had a terrible scene here last night. Your poor mother was very violent, and tried

to force her way to your father's room, where I fear she would have committed some desperate act."

Lilian clasped her hands despairingly.

"My poor mother!" she cried,—"my unhappy mother! What a cruel fate! She is alone, then,—alone in a madhouse, in the care of strangers!"

"Do not fear that she will be treated unkindly," said the doctor. "I will answer for it that she will be taken care of."

"Oh, yes, sir, I understand you!" exclaimed Lilian, bitterly; "my wretched mother will be cared for, I doubt not. But how? Do you think that hired nurses will have patience with her wayward moods,—her wild fancies? Do you think they will endure the caprices of madness? Oh, pray let me go and see her! Tell me where she is, that I may at least do something to comfort her in her loneliness."

"You will wear yourself out, Mrs. Maldon," said the doctor, "in your attendance upon both parents."

"I do not care!" exclaimed Lilian; "life was given us that we should do our duty, even though we should die in the struggle."

Early the next morning Lilian went to the mad-house at Wadsworth. She found her mother in a chamber which was comfortably furnished, but which was, notwithstanding, dark and gloomy. The wretched woman was calmer and more resigned than she had been for some time. The asylum discipline had done its work. The mother recognized her daughter, and talked to her with perfect composure.

Lilian found the doctor who was proprietor of the asylum to be a sensible and kind-hearted man. He sympathized with her sorrow for her mother's state, and promised to do all in his power to secure her comfort.

Lilian went almost every day to perform the sacred duty of consoling this poor demented creature. Every day she found her mother quieter and more rational; but every day she saw also that the mad woman was weaker in bodily health.

It seemed as if she were falling away, and that, as her physical power decreased, the clearness of her intellect returned. She talked upon many subjects, but rarely mentioned her husband. There appeared to be some dark memories connected with his name,—memories that she shuddered to recall.

Matters had gone on thus for upwards of two months. It was now towards the close of May, and Lilian and Aurora were as intimate as sisters.

Lilian had treated her companion with perfect confidence. She had told Aurora the melancholy secrets of her own home,—the madness of her mother, and the constant ill-health and gloomy reserve of her father. Aurora had often begged to be allowed to accompany Lilian to Wandsworth on her daily visits of duty, but she had always been refused. Lilian had feared that by some unhappy accident her mother might be seized with a fit of violence which would alarm and agitate the young girl.

But now there seemed no chance of this. Mrs. Burton was always perfectly calm and rational, and Lilian thought that perhaps the sight of a young and beautiful girl, who would treat her with gentleness and consideration, might have a cheering effect upon her.

So one bright May morning Lilian proposed to Aurora that they should visit the asylum together.

The young girl gladly assented. It was an errand of charity, and her generous heart expanded at the idea of being of use to another. She collected together some pretty trifles that she thought might please and amuse the wandering mind of the lunatic, and prepared to accompany her friend.

She looked more than usually lovely that morning, in her simple summer dress of lilac muslin, and her broad-leaved straw hat, with its careless knot of pale-blue ribbon.

As she was leaving the house with Lilian, Percival Holmwood drove up to the door in his light, elegant phaeton.

"I came to invite you to join me in a drive, ladies," he said; "it is so charming a morning that I thought you could scarcely wish to remain at home."

Lilian explained to him where they were going.

"Let me drive you over to Wandsworth, then," he said; "I will wait

until your errand is accomplished, and can then drive you to Richmond."

Aurora's eyes brightened at the thought of the drive. Her early life, and her poetical temperament, had combined to make her passionately fond of all beautiful and rural scenery.

It was arranged, therefore, that Percival Holmwood should drive them to the asylum, and that he should wait an hour while they visited Mrs. Burton.

They reached Wandsworth very quickly. Percival handed the ladies from the vehicle, and waited patiently while they entered the house.

The mad woman lay in a peaceful sleep. The two girls would not allow the attendant to arouse her. They both stood by the bedside, watching until she should awake.

They did not wait more than ten minutes before she opened her eyes slowly, and gazed upon the face on which the rays of sunshine streamed through a crevice in the closed shutters.

It was Aurora's face that was thus illuminated by the sun. She had thrown off her hat as she entered the room, and she stood at the foot of the bed, exactly opposite to the mad woman.

Mrs. Burton uttered a wild cry.

"Go away!" she shrieked; "go away! you are a ghost, — a pale, accusing spirit! Why do you come to torment me? Heaven knows that I have repented; Heaven knows that I have suffered for my sins. Why do you come to terrify me?"

Lilian murmured some comforting words, but Aurora interrupted her.

"Let me speak, Lilian," she cried, — "let me speak. There is some mystery in all this. Heaven grant that we may find the clue to it."

She knelt down by the bedside, and took the mad woman's hand in her own.

"I am no spirit," she said, gently. "I do not come here to accuse you. I am only a poor nameless girl, who has but one wish, one most ardent desire, and that is, to discover the secret of her birth. From what you said just now, I think that you can help me to find out that secret. Oh, if it be so, speak! — for Heaven's sake, speak! Do you *know* any one who resembles me?"

"*I did know some one*," exclaimed the lunatic, "years, and years, and years ago; but she is dead."

"Was she very like me?"

"So like you that I still think you must be her ghost."

"She was my mother, perhaps," said Aurora.

"No; she never had but one child, and he was a boy."

"A boy?"

"Yes; a poor, deserted, outcast child; an outcast in the streets of Paris, — a helpless child."

"In the streets of Paris?" cried Aurora, wildly; "it must be Percival of whom you speak."

"Percival!" murmured the mad woman; "no, no, he had no name."

"Yes, it must be he," cried Aurora; "tell me, tell me, for pity's sake, if that boy were living, if he had grown to manhood, and were here by your bedside, would you reveal to him the secret of his birth?"

"I would," exclaimed Mrs. Burton, — "I would. It would be some atonement for my sin; but let me see him alone; no one else must hear that story."

"You shall see him alone," cried Aurora. "Come, Lilian, come. Providence has brought us hither this day."

She hurried Lilian from the room, and five minutes afterwards Percival Holmwood entered with the doctor.

The mad woman uttered a cry as she looked upon the young man.

"His father's face," she exclaimed, — "his father's face, as like as if the dead had come back to life."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A REVELATION OF THE PAST.

How strange and mysterious are the winding ways of life! Percival Holmwood, the nameless child, the motherless and fatherless orphan, who had undergone such strange vicissitudes of fortune as rarely fall to the lot of man, stood now by the bedside of the dying mad woman, and for the first time felt that he was upon the eve of obtaining some clue to the mystery of his life.

Could it be, that after so many years of patient search,— after years of hope which had at last died away before the cruel force of despair, — could it be that accident had thrown him into the presence of a person who could reveal to him the long-hidden secret of his birth?

Mrs. Burton lay for some moments staring at him with a strange and vacant gaze. It seemed as if her brief agitation had been too much for her, and that the light of reason, which had been newly kindled in her poor, wandering mind, had once more deserted her, and left her again a maniac.

It was an awful pause for Percival Holmwood, — an agony of suspense which was almost too painful to bear.

"She is mad," he thought, despairingly, "and her words are meaningless as they are wild. I have been deluded by the fancy of a mad woman."

But suddenly the invalid spoke again.

"Yes," she murmured; "you have your father's face, not your mother's. It is he you resemble."

These words startled Percival Holmwood; for he remembered that he bore no resemblance to the portrait which he wore in his bosom, — the portrait that had been given to him as that of his mother.

The words of the mad woman were, perhaps, not altogether meaningless, and, if it were so, how eagerly would his ears open to receive any portion of the truth!

"Tell me," he cried, — "tell me, I conjure you, do you know anything of my father?"

"I do," answered Mrs. Burton. "I know too much, too much, too much! Would that I had never heard his name!"

"Speak, then; speak, I implore you!" cried Percival; "tell me all."

"I will speak," answered the invalid; "but I must speak to you alone; it is a secret, — a guilty, cruel secret, that must only be told to you, and not to you until you have sworn never to reveal it. I will not speak till we are alone."

Mrs. Burton looked as she spoke towards the mad-house doctor, who was still standing by the side of the bed.

"O sir," exclaimed Percival Holmwood, appealing to this gentleman, "leave us, — leave us, I implore you. Let me hear what this lady has to say. The secrets of life and death may hang upon her syllables. Let me hear her, I implore you!"

"I will leave you if I can do so with safety," the doctor answered, gravely.

He bent over the sick-bed, felt the pulse of the patient, and laid his hand upon her brow.

"I *can* safely leave you," he said, after having done this. "I shall be close at hand, and you can summon me when your interview is concluded."

He left the apartment, and Percival seated himself in a chair by the bedside.

He took the miniature from his bosom, and handed it to Mrs. Burton.

"Do you recognize that face?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the mad woman, with a wild cry, "it is the face of Estella Duvernay."

"And of my mother?"

"Yes, your unhappy mother."

The young man raised the portrait to his lips, and kissed it with reverential tenderness.

"My unhappy mother!" he said, repeating Mrs. Burton's words; "she was not happy, then?"

"Happy? No; she was persecuted by those who should have loved and protected her; she was murdered by those who should have sheltered and cherished her."

"Murdered!" exclaimed Percival, with a cry of horror.

"Yes, murdered!" returned Mrs. Burton. "There are other murders than those deeds of violence and bloodshed in which the assassin's dagger is plunged into his victim's breast; there is the slow and terrible murder which is done by torturing words and cruel deeds, — the murder in which the heart is killed, slowly but surely, inch by inch, and hour by hour."

"O Heaven!" cried the young millionnaire; "this is too horrible."

"Give me that picture," said Mrs. Burton."

He handed her the miniature. She examined it closely for some moments,

and then touched a spring in the gold framework. Often as Percival Holmwood had scrutinized the picture, he had never discovered this secret spring.

A portion of the gold back of the portrait slid away, revealing a small inner plate of gold, upon which these words were engraven:—

"Estella. Broken-hearted, widowed, and childless; but some day to be avenged."

Percival Holmwood gazed long and earnestly upon these words, but he did not speak. The brief inscription seemed to tell a terrible story; but he scarcely dared to guess the meaning of the dark emigma.

"Tell me — tell me!" he cried, after a pause; "you know the history of her to whom those words allude. You will reveal it to me, — will you not?"

"I will," answered Mrs. Burton; "but you must be patient with me, for my body and mind are alike feeble, and the story is a long and painful one. The part which I had in it has been the curse of my life. The remorse and misery I have suffered have destroyed my mind. But I am not always mad. It is only when I think too long of the dark history of the past that my mind wanders, and my senses leave me. I am calm to-day, and I know what I am saying. You believe that, — do you not?"

"I do," answered Percival, earnestly.

"Then you will be patient with me, and I will tell you all. I must begin at the beginning, or I shall never be able clearly to reveal the dark history. Eight-and-twenty years ago I was in a very humble position of life. My parents were poor but respectable, and I went out into the world as lady's-maid, in a family whose country-seat was near the village in which I was born and brought up. This family travelled, and I went to Paris with my mistress, who was a haughty, overbearing woman, and in whose service I began to feel very uncomfortable. She had no consideration for me, but treated me like a slave, keeping me closely employed at needlework all day, and sitting up, to await her return from some party, half the night. This was nearly killing me, and I resolved on seeking another situation; I had been educated somewhat above my station, and I understood a little of the French language. This enabled me to procure a new situation with very little difficulty, and I was fortunate enough to secure one in which I was told the work would be light, and the wages good.

"This new situation was in the household of the Marquis Hector Duvernay, one of the proudest and wealthiest of the nobility of France. I was to attend upon his only daughter, Mademoiselle Paulina, and I was to accompany my young mistress upon her journey from Paris, where she had been spending the winter with her father, the Marquis, to Chateau Duvernay, the family seat, which was situated in a lonely part of Normandy.

"I began my new life therefore in this solitary country mansion, which was dismal in spite of its grandeur, and gloomy in spite of its luxury.

"But I had not been deceived; my work was light, and my mistress, Mademoiselle Paulina, gave me nothing to complain of. She was reserved and proud, and very rarely addressed me; but, when she did speak to me, she always spoke mildly.

"Amongst the servants was the valet of the marquis, an Englishman; he was sulky, silent, and reserved in his manners, but apparently upon very confidential terms with his master.

"This man was Andrew Burton, my future husband.

"Both the marquis and his daughter were in deep mourning, and scarcely any visitors came to the chateau. I was told that this was in consequence of the recent death of Estella Duvernay, the twin sister of Mademoiselle Paulina, who had died suddenly a few months before at the chateau.

"I was shown the monument of this young lady, which adorned the church of the village, while her coffin lay buried in one of the stone compartments of a huge vault, in which the remains of the Duvernay family were deposited.

"I could not help thinking much of this young lady, who had died so suddenly, in the prime of youth and beauty, and I asked many questions respecting her; but none of the servants could tell

me much. No one but her father and sister had been with Mademoiselle Estella when she died. The village doctor had been summoned, but had only arrived when it was too late; and no one could tell of what disease the poor girl had died.

"At first I thought much upon this melancholy subject, and the long corridors of Chateau Duvernay seemed to me to be haunted by the pale ghost of my mistress's dead sister; but, by slow degrees, these painful thoughts wore away, and I began to feel comfortable in my new home.

"It was at this time, when I had almost forgotten the death of Mademoiselle Estella, that an accident occurred, which revealed to me the dark secret of Chateau Duvernay.

"The principal saloon of the chateau was a splendid apartment, and opening out of it there were several smaller chambers, one of which was situated at the extreme end of the building, and formed part of a turret at the angle of the chateau.

"This inner chamber was rarely occupied by any one except the marquis, who often sat for hours alone in this chamber with the door locked from within.

"At such times nobody dared to approach the haughty master of the house.

"But upon this day I had been sent to the apartment by my young mistress, who had been reading to her father, and who had left her book behind her.

"I entered the room. It was quite empty; and, after having found the book for which I had been sent, I could not resist the temptation of examining the costly decorations of the chamber.

"The walls were adorned with pictures of wonderful value. The furniture was dark and heavy, but magnificent; and, amongst the objects that most struck me, was a sideboard or cabinet of carved oak and massive gilding.

"I knelt down before this cabinet to examine it more closely.

"One of the gilded ornaments was dull and tarnished, and, anxious to be of use, I rubbed it with my hand, in the hope of restoring its brightness.

"As I did so, I was nearly knocked backwards by a sudden movement of the cabinet, which wheeled away from the wall and advanced towards me.

"I had touched a secret spring.

"Behind the cabinet was revealed an opening in the wall, which was evidently the commencement of a hidden passage, leading, I knew not whither.

"I was about to examine further, when I was startled by a harsh voice, which demanded what I was doing.

"I turned round, and beheld the Marquis Duvernay."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER.

In spite of the pleadings of his better reason, the Duke of Arlington suffered himself to be disturbed by the strange words of the gipsy upon Epsom Downs.

He tried in vain to argue with himself that the woman was an ignorant impostor, who pretended to a knowledge of that art which had never been other than a delusion, even in the hands of the wisest men.

Why, then, should he remember her words? Why should he brood so long and wearily over their dark meaning?

He had seen the expression of terror which had come over the gipsy's face as she dropped the hand of the duchess.

That, at least, was genuine. Pretender though the woman might be, that look of horror and alarm was, at least, real.

Gerald Mortimer returned to the carriage. He found his wife still laughing and talking gayly with Percival Holmwood.

"Did you pursue that woman, Gerald?" she asked, as the duke approached.

"Yes," answered Gerald, with evident embarrassment.

"And did you find out the cause of her absurd conduct?"

"She declined to tell me the reason

of her behavior. Pray do not alarm yourself about it, my dear Blanche," added the duke, kindly; "there is no truth in anything these women say."

"Oh, I am perfectly aware of that," the duchess answered, laughing; "but I thought there might be some hidden meaning in the woman's conduct; I thought it might be a trick to extort money."

The duke started as his wife said this; he felt a sudden sentiment of relief.

What more likely than that the gipsy's conduct had been pursued with the idea of exciting curiosity, and thus obtaining a larger reward than she might have won by more honest means?

The woman was only a skilful actress, after all, and he had suffered himself to be fooled by her trickery.

He repeated this to himself over and over again; yet still the dreadful words haunted him.

Still he remembered that strange declaration: —

"The mark upon the lady's hand is the mark of murder!"

He remembered that mysterious meeting with the White Phantom in the dark chancel of St. George's Church.

That shadowy being had declared that his young and innocent-seeming wife was a murderess, — the murderess of her lover, Hubert Monkton.

With these thoughts in his mind, the duke sat silent and gloomy as the carriage drove from Epsom to London.

He was not unobserved. The limpid blue eyes of the duchess glanced furtively towards his face every now and then, though she appeared to be absorbed in conversation with Percival Holmwood, who sat opposite to her.

She addressed the duke several times, and endeavored to draw him into the conversation; but each time he answered her absently, and she was compelled to abandon her attempt.

A dark shadow stole over her own face as she perceived the preoccupation of her husband's mind. The heart of the guilty woman was no stranger to fear, and she dreaded some peril to herself in the change that was apparent in the duke's manner.

A brilliant party met that evening at the splendid dinner-table in Cavendish Square, and the duchess looked almost like a queen at the head of that aristocratic board. She wore a dress of peach-colored velvet, and a diamond coronet glittered upon her alabaster brow. There were many lovely women assembled at that dinner-table, but the beauty of Blanche Mortimer outshone all rivalry.

Percival Holmwood was one of the guests at that dinner-party. He was a constant visitor in Cavendish Square, and received invitations to every *fête* or entertainment given by the duchess.

He knew the reason of this, and he felt no gratitude for the attention which he received. He knew that Blanche Mortimer feared him.

A large party met in the evening, and the duchess sat in a small boudoir leading out of the long suite of drawing-rooms, surrounded by the most aristocratic of her guests.

It was a privilege to enter this inner chamber, — this *sanctum sanctorum* of the world of fashion. But Percival Holmwood was there. He stood close beside the low, luxurious seat of velvet and gold upon which the duchess reclined, half buried in the crimson pillows. It seemed to her as if this man pursued her. He was near her everywhere she went, constant as her shadow.

Yet she dared not defy him, she dared not banish him from her presence, for she felt that he knew, at least, some part of the secret of her crime.

The party assembled in the boudoir were busy discussing a *fête*, which was to be given by the Marchioness of Cromton, at her villa, near Twickenham. This *fête* was to be a masked ball, held in the lovely grounds of the villa, which sloped down to the brink of the Thames.

These grounds were to be illuminated with colored lamps, and it was prophesied that a scene of enchantment was to be prepared to surprise the eyes of the fashionable world.

"The marchioness has kept her arrangements the most profound secret," said one of the gentlemen; "but, notwithstanding her precautions, all kinds of rumors have got afloat. They say

that there are to be bands of Swiss minstrels; that there is to be an Alpine village built upon the borders of the Thames, and lighted with lamps in imitation of stars. They say that there are to be gondolas upon the river, and fairy-like bridges thrown from one shore to the other. In short, I know not what there is that is *not* promised at this unprecedented entertainment. Of course, your Grace will honor it with your presence," added the young man, turning to the duchess, "or the marchioness will find her *fete* a failure, in spite of all the Swiss minstrels and Chinese jugglers in Europe and Asia."

"I have promised to go," answered Blanche Mortimer, with a smile.

"And in what costume?"

"That is *my* secret, Mr. Fotherington," replied the duchess. "Mystery and secrecy are the greatest charms of a masked ball."

"Especially in Paris," said Percival Holmwood, quietly.

The duchess looked up suddenly, and met the eyes of the millionnaire.

The delicate tints of her complexion had blanched.

Her heart sank within her as she remembered that awful meeting with the dead in the anteroom of the box at the Parisian opera-house.

What if she were to see the dead once more at this English ball? A terrible fear came over her, and she felt, for a few moments, that she would not have courage to enter upon the scene of festivity.

It seemed as if Percival Holmwood had read her inmost thoughts.

"I fear you are about to change your mind, your Grace," he said, "and that you do not intend to go to the masked ball."

"No!" answered the duchess, proudly, looking the millionnaire full in the face as she spoke. "I have not changed my mind; I shall go to this ball."

Nothing more was said upon the subject that night, but the duchess felt that Percival Holmwood had had some hand in that horrible meeting with the dead, and that he knew of that night of terror. Was it a trick that had been played upon her? she asked herself. Had she been the dupe of some optical delusion?

No, no. She had seen the features of her dead lover. Every line of that ghastly face had been distinct and palpable before her. It was no shadowy form that she had gazed upon, but the unmistakable face of the dead.

She retired to rest that night with these thoughts in her mind, and a strange and almost inexplicable dread of the festival at which she was to appear.

But the days hurried by, the night of Lady Cromton's ball drew near, and the evening of the *fete* found the duchess seated in her dressing-room, surrounded by the glittering implements of her toilet, and with her two maids preparing the brilliant costume which she was to wear.

This costume was as simple as it was beautiful.

It was the dress of a peri. A flowing robe of the finest and most cloud-like gauze, with long wings of snowy feathers, which were attached to the white shoulders of the duchess.

A girdle of large diamonds, made to imitate dewdrops, encircled her waist, and a large diamond star trembled upon her forehead. Her long, pale, golden hair streamed over her shoulders, and fell loosely below her waist. In this costume she seemed the picture of innocence and beauty.

The duke wore the uniform of one of Louis the Thirteenth's musketeers. He sat in his library ready dressed, and waiting for the duchess, at a little after nine o'clock upon the evening of the *fete*.

Gerald Mortimer cared little for such scenes of frivolous gayety as that in which he was about to appear. But he believed that his young wife wished to appear at the *fete*, and he was always ready to sacrifice his own happiness to hers.

He sat reading the evening papers, and waiting for the arrival of a messenger to announce that the duchess was ready.

The hands of the clock over the chimney-piece pointed to half-past nine, when a servant entered the library. But he did not bring a message from

the duchess. He brought a note, which he handed to the duke upon a silver salver.

"Who brought this letter?" asked Gerald Mortimer, as he took the note from the salver, and perceived that it had not come by post.

"It was brought by a gentleman, your Grace," the man answered. "I did not see his face, but he begged that it might be immediately given into your Grace's hand."

"Very good," said the duke. "Go and see if her Grace is ready."

He tore open the envelope. He attached no importance to the lateness of the hour at which this letter had been delivered, as his exalted position exposed him to the annoyance of a crowd of correspondents; but, as he drew the lamp close to his elbow, and read the contents of the communication, a cloud gathered upon his face.

The letter ran thus: —

"The Duke of Arlington refused to be warned by those who would have saved him from a terrible position. He has taken the steps he chose to take, despite all warning, and the consequences of his folly must be upon his own head. But if he would be *convinced* of the guilt of the woman he has made his wife, let him come to the lonely house by the river-side, a quarter of a mile beyond the grounds of the Marchioness of Cromton. Let him come, and he shall see with his own eyes. Let him come, and he shall hear with his own ears. But, above all, let him keep his coming secret.

"THE WHITE PHANTOM.

"P. S. — The appointed time is an hour after midnight. The duke must be neither earlier nor later."

The White Phantom! Whoever had written this letter must be acquainted with the meeting in the church, and must be a party to the mystery which had cast such a shadow over the duke's happiness.

"I will go!" exclaimed Gerald Mortimer, "but I will not go alone. If there be a plot, I will discover it. I will take a detective officer with me, and he shall help to unravel the mystery."

But in another moment the duke re*membered that if the* woman he loved *should be indeed guilty* of the horrible crime of which her mysterious accusers spoke, a detective officer might discover that which would drag the guilty creature to the scaffold.

Could he endure this? Could he see the woman he had loved placed in a criminal dock to answer for her wickedness?

No! a thousand times no!

But could he believe her guilty? Must he not rather believe that she was the victim of some fatal combination of circumstances; or else that the accusations uttered against her came from enemies who wished to destroy her?

In any case, he decided that it would be wisest to go alone.

"Surely I can trust to my own wits," he thought. "Surely I shall be able to fathom this vile plot unaided, except by Heaven."

He ascended to the dressing-room of the duchess, who stood before her mirror, looking exquisitely lovely in the elegant costume that she had chosen.

She turned to her husband with a smile, as he entered the apartment.

"It cannot be," he thought, as he gazed upon her bright face, — "it cannot be that one thought of guilt could lurk beneath such innocent and childlike loveliness."

"Well, Gerald," exclaimed Blanche, "I am ready at last, you see. And now tell me, do you like my costume?"

"It is charming; but —"

"But what, Gerald?" exclaimed the duchess. "How grave you are! I am sure that something has happened to annoy you."

"I have been annoyed, Blanche," the duke answered, gravely. "I regret to say that I shall not be able to accompany you to the *fete* to-night."

"Not go with me to the *fete*?"

"No, Blanche; I have received a letter which calls me away upon important business. Will you call for Lady Westmacott, Blanche, and go with her?"

"Yes, if you wish it; but I am so sorry you cannot come. I have a very good mind to abandon all idea of going myself. But I suppose, as I am dressed, I had better go."

"Yes, yes; pray go. Lady Westmacott will take good care of you when

she hears that you have been obliged to go alone. Good-night, Blanche."

He did not take his wife's hand before leaving the room, and the duchess wondered at his cold manner. But in her secret soul she was very glad that her husband was not to be with her at the *fete*.

She had dreaded the ball with that strange feeling of terror of which we have spoken; but she had dreaded still more that the duke's gaze would be upon her.

She dismissed all dread, all terror from her mind, and departed bright and radiant, under the care of Lady Westmacott, an elderly woman, who was a very intimate friend of the duke's, and who was delighted to act as chaperon to the beautiful young duchess.

CHAPTER L.

WHITHER THE SECRET PASSAGE LED.

MRS. BURTON continued her story, to which Percival Holmwood listened with breathless intensity.

"I turned," she said, "and perceived the Marquis Duvernay standing close behind me. I cannot describe to you the terror which took possession of me as I beheld the cold and searching eyes of my master fixed upon me, with the angry light glittering in them, until they seemed to emit the ominous brilliancy of the eyes of a snake.

"The Marquis Duvernay was a proud and a stern man, dreaded by all his servants, even by those who had served him longest and most faithfully. I had been told again and again that he was a man whom it was terrible to offend; for *he never forgot nor forgave*.

"I had thought little of this, for I had rarely crossed the path of the marquis. My duty had been only to attend my young mistress, Mademoiselle Paulina.

"But now I felt that by an unhappy accident I had, perhaps, mortally offended my severe master.

"I remained on my knees, too much bewildered to make any excuse for what I had done, or to explain how chance had revealed to me the secret of the oaken cabinet.

"'So,' exclaimed the marquis, 'you are a spy, Mademoiselle Marie?'

"My mind revolted against this accusation, and I found courage to speak.

"'No, monsieur,' I replied, indignantly. 'I am no spy; it was by accident that I opened the cabinet.'

"I explained how it had happened; but the marquis shrugged his shoulders, and looked at me with a mocking smile.

"'People of your class are not very particular about the truth,' he said, with a cool insolence that stung me to the quick; 'but I suppose if you take an oath, you can keep it faithfully?'

"'I never yet told a lie, monsieur,' I answered, proudly.

"'Good! then you are an exception to your class. In that case you will be good enough to swear to me that you will tell no one of the secret you have discovered to-day.'

"I readily took the oath which the marquis dictated to me, though I could but wonder that he should attach so much importance to the secret of a hidden passage in the old chateau. I had heard that secret passages and staircases were common enough in ancient houses, but I imagined they had long ceased to be used in these modern days.

"I was about to retire, when, to my surprise, the marquis called me back.

"'Stay,' he said, 'I have not done with you yet. At what time does your mistress retire to rest?'

"I wondered at this question, but it was my duty to answer it respectfully, and I did so unhesitatingly.

"Mademoiselle Paulina usually dismisses me between ten and eleven o'clock, monsieur,' I replied.

"'Good,' exclaimed the marquis, who had thrown himself into a luxurious easy-chair, and was reading a newspaper with an air of consummate carelessness; 'then at twelve o'clock to-night, you will be good enough to come to me in this room.'

"'At twelve o'clock, monsieur?' I repeated, scarcely believing my ears.

"'Yes,' replied the marquis, still

reading the paper, and not condescending to look at me as he spoke, 'at midnight. I have need of the services of a trustworthy person, — a person who can keep a secret. If you are, as you say, trustworthy, you are the person to serve me, and shall be paid liberally for your service.'

"'But, monsieur,' I exclaimed, 'may I be allowed to know the nature of this service which you require?'

"My master laid down his newspaper, and regarded me with a look of mingled astonishment and *hauteur*.

"'I am the Marquis Duvernay,' he said, 'and I am accustomed to be obeyed. Leave me, and return at twelve o'clock to-night. You will find me here with my steward, Andrew Burton.'

"I bowed, and retired from the apartment. I felt myself powerless to disobey this haughty nobleman, who was accustomed to command his servants as if they had been his slaves.

"Besides, why should I refuse to obey him? The marquis was universally respected. He was celebrated for his pride in his ancient and unsullied name; surely, then, he would never do any evil deed that could cast a shadow upon that stainless heritage.

"I reasoned thus as I returned to the apartments of my mistress. Mademoiselle Paulina had not observed the length of my absence, and did not, therefore, ask me any questions.

"The proud and haughty girl was too much absorbed by her own happiness to pay any great attention to the minor incidents of her life. She was engaged to be married to a wealthy English baronet, Sir Harvey Oswald, whom she loved with the passionate devotion of a first affection.

"I believe that the English baronet returned the young girl's affection; but he was to the full as proud as his future father-in-law, the Marquis Duvernay. He was staying at the chateau, and I saw much of him in my attendance upon my young mistress; for Sir Harvey and his future bride seemed to look upon me as an automaton, and conversed in my presence as freely as if they had been alone.

"*I once heard* Mademoiselle Paulina ask her lover a strange question. He had been declaring his affection for her half playfully, half in earnest, when she stopped him with a sudden gesture, imperious as that of a queen.

"'It is easy to talk thus, Harvey,' she said; 'but would you love me as truly if my birth and station were far inferior to your own?'

"'I would,' exclaimed the young baronet, with enthusiasm; and then he added, more gravely, 'If no dishonorable deed had stained your name, Paulina, I would never care how humble that name might be.'

"'But if it had been stained by dishonor, — if, through no fault of mine, a shadow had fallen upon it — '

"'Then, my poor darling,' answered the baronet, mournfully, 'dear though you might be to me, I should be compelled to resign you. A man's name is not his own. It is a pledge which he holds, and for which he is responsible to the past and to the future, to his ancestors and to his children; and he would be a villain and a coward if, for his own happiness, he suffered the shadow of wrong to fall upon it.'

"Mademoiselle Paulina's face was turned from her lover as he uttered these words. I was standing at the other end of the room, and happened to see the reflection of that face in a large mirror opposite to the ottoman on which the young girl was seated. To my surprise, I saw that the face of my mistress was ghastly pale, and that her features were convulsed, as if by some terrible mental struggle.

"No more was said upon this subject. The baronet talked of lighter and gayer themes, and a few minutes afterwards the lovers left the chateau on horseback for a long ride in a forest that bordered the park, which, in itself, was almost as large as an English forest.

"That night I heard my mistress sobbing hysterically in her own room.

"I dared not intrude upon her, knowing full well that her haughty spirit would brook no witness to her grief. But I was fearful that she might become really ill, and might therefore need my aid; so I lingered near the threshold of the door for some minutes.

"Every now and then I heard her utter wild and passionate words, whose syllables were broken by her sobs.

"'I cannot give him up,' she cried, — 'I cannot give him up! Oh, how proud, how cruel his words were! No hope, no hope, none! But I cannot give him up! I will stain my own soul with any crime rather than resign his love!'

"These were fearful words to hear, but I had no wish to pry into my mistress's secrets. I felt that there must be some dark mystery in this aristocratic household, but I hoped that I might remain in happy ignorance of it.

"But, after my strange interview with the marquis, I could not dispossess myself of the idea that there was indeed a mystery hidden by the gray walls of the Chateau Duvernay, and that the secret passage which I had so accidentally discovered had something to do with it. I was restless and uneasy all the day, but my young mistress was too much absorbed by the society of Sir Harvey Oswald to take any notice of my embarrassment. The hours passed with unnatural slowness, as it seemed to me, and at last the time arrived at which I was in the habit of leaving my young mistress's room.

"It wanted a quarter to eleven when I quitted Mademoiselle Paulina's apartments. I had, therefore, an hour and a quarter to wait. The servants had all retired to rest; the lamps in the corridors of the chateau were extinguished, and the whole building seemed wrapped in darkness.

"I cannot describe the strange terror that I felt as I groped my way along the gloomy passages that led to the gallery which communicated with the rooms occupied by the marquis.

"I found a dim light burning in this gallery, but in that uncertain glimmer the pictures which adorned the walls looked pale and ghastly, and I sat down in the recess of a window, shuddering with foolish fear, to wait the hour at which I was to present myself to the marquis.

"The great clock of the chateau struck eleven soon after I had seated *myself in the gallery*. The heavy strokes reverberated through the quiet building with an almost unearthly sound, as it seemed to me, at that dead hour of the night.

"I had still an entire hour to wait, — alone in that dim obscurity, — alone, with the pictures of the dead.

"The long suite of rooms occupied by the marquis was before me. The doors of the outer apartments were all open, and through the long vista of the magnificent rooms I could see a brilliant light gleaming beneath the door of the inner chamber in which I had that morning seen the marquis.

"I could hear the beating of my own heart in the silence of the deserted gallery. I counted the minutes, — even the seconds, perhaps. The quarters were chimed by the great clock of the chateau, but each quarter seemed to me to be longer than the longest hour I had ever known.

"At last midnight struck. At the first stroke I rose, and hurried through the long suite of chambers, until I reached the door of the inner apartment.

"I knocked, and a voice from within bade me enter.

"I opened the door, and passed timidly and hesitatingly into the apartment. The marquis was not alone. Two persons were seated at a respectful distance from him. One of these was Andrew Burton, the steward; the other was an elderly man, and a stranger to me.

"'This is the girl of whom I spake,' said the marquis, addressing himself to his steward. 'What say you, Burton? Can she be trusted?'

"The steward answered coldly.

"'I have no reason to think the contrary,' he said.

"'Enough,' replied the marquis, rising and walking towards the recess, which was hung with curtains of black velvet, fringed with silver.

"He flung aside the curtains, and revealed an oratory, at the back of which hung a superb crucifix of carved ivory.

"'Kneel!' he cried, sternly, seizing me by the wrist as he spoke.

"I sank upon my knees, as much in terror at the strange solemnity of the

scene, as in obedience to my master's command.

"'Listen, girl,' said the marquis, pointing to the crucifix; 'swear to me, by yonder holy symbol, that you will never, until your dying day, reveal to any human creature, the secret which is about to be confided to you. Swear.'

"I was about to obey him; but, bewildered and terrified as I was, I hesitated before doing so. I had no wish to discover the secrets of the Chateau Duvernay. Should the knowledge of any guilty deed come to me, my duty would be to reveal it. How, then, could I swear eternal secrecy?

"I was about to remonstrate, but the marquis, for the third time, cried 'Swear!'

"I looked up in his face. That cold and inflexible face struck an icy terror to my inmost soul; and, scarce knowing what I did, I repeated the solemn words dictated to me, and took the oath of secrecy.

"I swore to keep the secret *till my dying day.*

"I feel that my day of death is close at hand, and that I am now free to reveal the secret which has been the curse and burden of my life.

"'Enough,' cried the marquis, raising me from my knees; 'now hold yourself in readiness to follow me.'

"The steward and the stranger rose. For the first time I looked more closely at the stranger; he was shabbily dressed and bald, and he wore spectacles, which concealed the expression of his eyes.

"'Come, Doctor Servin,' said the marquis, addressing this man.

"I remembered that Servin was the name of the doctor who had attended the late Mademoiselle Estella in her dying moments, and I looked at this man with considerable interest.

"There was something in his appearance which inspired me with a feeling of aversion, and yet I scarcely knew why it was so.

"But I had no time to think of this, for the marquis had touched the secret spring of the cabinet, the heavy piece of furniture had removed itself, and the dark and narrow secret passage was revealed."

CHAPTER LI.

THE VAULTS OF THE CHATEAU.

"'ENTER!' cried the marquis, pointing to the dark opening.

"The steward entered first, stooping, and almost crawling on his hands and knees, in order to pass through the narrow aperture. The doctor went next. The marquis then turned to me.

"'Now, Marie,' he said.

"I obeyed him; and, creeping through the aperture, I found myself in a vaulted passage, which was low and narrow, but in which we could at least stand upright.

"'Wait!' cried the steward, seizing me by the arm, as I was about to advance. At this moment the marquis came through the secret opening, carrying a small lamp, and I perceived a steep flight of stone stairs immediately before me.

"We descended these stairs, the doctor and the steward going before me, the marquis following. At the bottom of a flight of steps that seemed to me almost interminable, we came to a long arched corridor, which had the damp, earthy smell peculiar to an underground building.

"Out of this corridor opened several small iron doors. These doors were numbered, and there was a grating in each of them.

"At one of the gratings the marquis stopped and listened with the lamp in his hand.

"There was no sound from within.

"'What, no noise to-night?' cried my master, with a mocking smile. 'We have learnt patience at last, then; we have discovered that it is useless to be violent, and we are resigned to our fate. In that case you may go in, doctor; there is no fear of your being torn to pieces, as you might have been last night.'

"The marquis unlocked the iron door with a small key which he took from his pocket. This key was not at all like that of a dungeon; yet the iron door was stronger than many a prison door.

"The doctor entered the vault-like

chamber, but the marquis and his steward passed on. They seemed for a moment to have forgotten me, and as the door closed upon the doctor, I drew near to the grating, and looked through into the chamber within.

"Doctor Servin had taken the lamp from the hand of the marquis, and by the feeble light I was able to distinguish every object in the chamber.

"It was like the cell of a condemned criminal, and contained nothing but a little straw, a block of stone, and a pitcher, upon the top of which there was a loaf of the coarsest black bread.

"Upon the wretched straw bed, with his face turned towards the roof of the cell, lay a handsome and aristocratic-looking man, who wore the uniform of a colonel in the French army. His epaulettes were black and tarnished, his high riding-boots were splashed and spattered with mud, and his costume had, altogether, a wild and neglected appearance.

"His face looked ghastly white in the dim lamplight, and there was a stony and fixed appearance about it, that chilled me as I gazed upon him.

"'So,' muttered Dr. Servin, 'our patient has grown quiet at last. Rather alarmingly quiet, I'm afraid, for I think Colonel Hector Valancy would never be still unless he were in a very low state. Let us have a look at him,—fast asleep it seems, worn out by violent emotions and low diet. Take care, *Monsieur le Marquis*, or you will go a little too far with your revenge.'

"The doctor set down the lamp upon a little stone ledge near the door, and approached his patient. He knelt down beside the prostrate man, and looked very scrutinizingly into his face. Then, with a sudden cry of surprise, not altogether unmingled with terror, he laid his hand upon the colonel's breast.

"'I thought so, marquis,' he said, with a singular expression; 'Hector Valancy is dead! The soldier's heart has broken. Foolish people might call this murder.'

"I can never describe the horror that took possession of me as I heard these awful words. But I feared also, and I was silent. Might I not be forever entombed in these dreadful vaults, if I dared to utter a word of surprise, a cry of terror?

"I moved away from the door before the doctor emerged from the cell. I found the marquis and his steward waiting for me at the end of the long passage. The events which I have described had only occupied two or three minutes, and my absence had not been observed. They had only thought that I was slow in groping my way along the corridor.

"The marquis opened a large iron door at the end of the vaulted passage, and we entered another cell or vault, in which there was a second door. My master unlocked this door, and to my surprise I beheld a scene altogether different to that which had just met my gaze.

"The chamber into which we now entered was a sitting-room or boudoir, exquisitely and luxuriously furnished, and lighted with a lamp which shed a subdued radiance upon the objects which it illuminated.

"A piano, books, flowers, pictures, adorned this chamber, which was, notwithstanding, a stone vault, in whose gloomy depths the light of heaven never penetrated. But the stone walls were hidden by silken draperies, the stone floor was concealed by a thick carpet of velvet pile.

"'Wait here,' said the marquis, addressing his steward; 'but you, girl, come with me,' he added.

"I obeyed, and followed my haughty master into an inner apartment, even more luxuriously furnished than the first. This second room was a bedchamber, and upon an elegant couch lay a beautiful woman, who raised her eyes and uttered a cry of surprise as she beheld us.

"I also gave utterance to a loud cry of astonishment, for I thought that this woman was no other than my mistress whom I had left asleep in her own chamber an hour and a half before.

"'Mademoiselle Paulina!' I exclaimed.

"The young girl looked at me earnestly for a few moments, and then covered her face with her hands.

"'This is not Mademoiselle Paulina,' said the marquis, sternly.

"I stared wonderingly at my master, for I knew not if this could be real. I thought I must be under the influence of some dark dream.

"I could not understand the meaning of this scene. Was this girl a ghost, or was she indeed my young mistress, Mademoiselle Paulina?

"I gazed even yet more earnestly upon her, and then, for the first time, I discovered that there was some slight difference between the face I looked upon and that of my young mistress. The occupant of this underground chamber was thinner than Mademoiselle Paulina; her face was shrunk and wasted, and of a marble-like pallor.

"As she looked at me, I thought that I saw a pleading glance in her dark eyes,—a glance which seemed to say, 'Stop with me.'

"There was something terrible to me in the mystery of this underground retreat. Luxurious and even splendid as was the chamber in which I now found myself, I could not help fancying that there must be some hidden link between it and the dreary cell in which I had seen the doctor bending over the prostrate form of the dead man. I shuddered as I looked around, but shuddered most as my eye fell upon the lovely face of the girl, who lay upon the bed of down, shrouded by curtains of silk.

"The marquis pointed to this girl.

"'This lady is henceforth your mistress, Marie,' he said, with an air of command which seemed to allow of no contradiction. 'You will serve her faithfully, and you may have to serve her long. So long as you remain in attendance upon her, you must be content to remain in these apartments.'

"He drew aside a silken curtain that hung before a narrow archway, which communicated with a small inner apartment, comfortably but plainly furnished.

"'This chamber has been prepared for you,' said the marquis; 'you will be close to your mistress, and you will be ready to attend upon her at any time that she may need your assistance.'

"My heart sank within me as the haughty nobleman spoke thus. Was I *a slave, that I was* to be doomed to imprisonment in a subterranean vault, to whose dark recesses the light of heaven never penetrated?

"'I cannot accept this service,' I cried, indignantly. 'If this lady is willing to live in such a place as this, others cannot be expected to share in her taste.'

"'Willing!' exclaimed the young girl, in a voice whose despairing tone touched me to the heart. 'Heaven knows,' she added, in the same tone, 'how *willing* I am to be buried alive in this horrible vault!'

"'Bah!' exclaimed the marquis, addressing himself to me, and shrugging his shoulders contemptuously; 'you common people are terribly fastidious! What can it matter to you, girl, whether your service compels you to live above or below the level of the ground? Were you a peasant girl in that English land of which you boast so proudly, you might be toiling in some damp and dismal mine for a wretched pittance that would scarcely buy you bread. Here, you will live luxuriously, and you will be paid nobly. But why do I waste time in reasoning away your childlike nonsense? I am not accustomed to be disobeyed, nor am I used to reason with those who serve me. Your service commences from this night. I leave you here with your mistress.'

"I tried to remonstrate.

"'This is tyranny, monsieur!' I exclaimed. 'I have been entrapped hither. I demand to be taken back to the place from whence I came.'

"The marquis smiled.

"'It will be wiser not to oppose me, Mademoiselle Marie,' he said, with an air of studied sarcasm. 'Remain here willingly, and you shall be amply repaid for your service. But whether you accept that service willingly or not, you will have to remain here. The Marquis Duvernay does not permit obstinacy in his servants.'

"'But am I ever to emerge from this horrible place?' I asked, terror-stricken by the cool resolution of the marquis.

"'Yes,' answered my master; 'you will be free to go where you please when I have ceased to need your services.'

"'And that will be—'

"'At the end of a few months, perhaps,' answered the marquis.

"'But if I should refuse?' I murmured.

"'In that case we shall be compelled to find some means of *making* you more reasonable,' the French nobleman replied, with gloomy significance.

"Those words seemed to send a strange thrill through my every vein. I remembered the scene which I had beheld in the cell. If I loved my life it would be wise to obey the marquis.

"'I consent to remain,' I said, after a pause.

"'Enough,' answered my master; 'you have shown discretion, child, and will find you have made a wise choice.'

"'Thank Heaven!" cried the girl, who resembled Mademoiselle Paulina, —'thank Heaven for this! I shall have at least one friend, if but an humble one.'

"I know not why, but these few words touched me to the heart, and I was almost glad that my destiny had led me to this subterranean abode.

"'Believe me that I will be your friend, mademoiselle,' I answered, carried away by my own enthusiasm; 'I will be your faithful friend to the best of my power.'

"The marquis looked at me with a dark frown.

"'I can permit no protestations of friendship,' he said, sternly; 'you are here, Marie, to serve a lady of high rank who has need of a servant, nothing more. Come, girl, I must speak to you in the next apartment. Follow me.'

"The marquis passed into the adjoining chamber; and I, who dared not disobey him, followed immediately. But I found time to glance back at the young lady, with a smile that was intended to assure her that I should be faithful.

"The doctor and the steward were both waiting in the boudoir.

"'You can go in to see your patient, Monsieur Servin,' the marquis said to the doctor.

"Doctor Servin bowed, and then rose to leave the room.

"'Now, Mademoiselle Marie, listen to me,' said the marquis, 'and be prepared to carefully observe that which I tell you. The lady whom you have just seen is detained in these apartments for reasons which affect the name and honor of an ancient house. It is not for you to seek to know these reasons. It is enough for you to be told that *she is mad!* Whatever she may tell you, you will listen to as the raving of a maniac. Whatever questions she asks you, you will reply to as you would to the questions of a mad woman, or a child. Do you understand this?'

"'I will try to do so, monsieur,' I answered; 'but the lady's name?'

"'She has no name,' replied the Marquis."

CHAPTER LII.

THE HISTORY OF ESTELLA.

"The marquis and his two attendants, the doctor and the steward, departed, leaving me alone in the lamp-lit boudoir.

"I glanced round; nothing could have been more elegant than this subterranean chamber; but even the costly furniture seemed to have a gloomy look when I remembered that no ray of the blessed sunlight ever shone upon it, no varying beauty of the fleeting day ever brightened it. I had thrown myself exhausted and weary into a low easy-chair, almost too much bewildered to think clearly upon any one subject, when I was startled by a footstep behind me; and, turning round, I beheld an old French woman, dressed like a peasant, and wearing an enormous white cap upon her gray head.

"She was standing in another archway, which I had not before perceived, and which communicated with a small chamber that was evidently used as a kitchen.

"'So,' she said, in a feeble, chirping voice, 'you are the new lady's-maid, I suppose?'

"I was agreeably surprised at the appearance of this old woman. In the dreary retreat in which I found myself,

the presence of a second human being seemed an unspeakable blessing. Besides this, I thought that the old woman would be able to throw some light upon the mysteries of this underground abode.

"'Yes, madame,' I answered, civilly, 'I am here to attend upon mademoiselle—'

"I waited, thinking that she would doubtless supply the name I paused for.

"'No!' she cried, 'not upon mademoiselle—upon madame, upon madame!'

"'Ah!' I exclaimed, 'the lady is married, then; but what is her name?'

"The old woman shook her head, and laughed with the stupid air of rustic ignorance.

"'I don't know,' she answered; 'I only know that the lady is to be called madame. The grand monsieur told me that she had no other name.'

"What!' I cried, 'do you know nothing, then, of the secrets of this horrible place?'

"'No,' answered the woman, stupidly; 'I only know that I was brought from a village, many, many miles away, one dark night, and that I was brought here blindfolded, so that I should not know where I was coming.'

"'You do not, then, even know where you are?' I exclaimed.

"'No,' answered the woman, 'nor do I much care. I am to be well paid for my trouble, and I am to be taken back to my native village as soon as the grand monsieur has no longer need of my services.'

"I saw that it was utterly useless to question this woman. She knew nothing, she did not even wish to know anything, of the secrets of the place in which she lived. I saw in this the terrible power of gold, and I no longer wondered that the Marquis Duvernay was haughty and imperious. He treated people as his slaves, and because he had been accustomed to find them willing slaves so long as he paid them well.

"There was an elegant ormolu timepiece upon a bracket in the boudoir, and I saw that it was now three o'clock. I stepped softly into the room of my future mistress, and I saw that she had fallen asleep. I watched her for some minutes, wondering at the marvellous likeness between her and Mademoiselle Paulina. She sighed heavily in her sleep, and once moaned aloud. Once, too, she murmured in a sorrowful voice the name of 'Hector.'

"I started; for the doctor had spoken of the dead man as Colonel Hector Valancy.

"'Who can this young girl be?' I thought; 'she is of the same age as Mademoiselle Paulina, and every feature in her face is the same. Yet she cannot be her sister, for the marquis never had more than two children, and one of them lies buried in the vaults of the village chapel. This young girl must, therefore, be some more distant connexion,—a cousin, perhaps.'

"I retired to rest in my small chamber, in which I found every comfort that the most fastidious lady's-maid could desire; yet I felt a sense of gloom and oppression which I could not overcome; I felt as if I had been entombed, living, in a grave.

"Early the next morning I entered my mistress's room in order to obey any commands she might have for me.

"I found her awake. She lifted her large, dark, mournful eyes to my face, and gazed earnestly upon me.

"'Thank Heaven, you have remained with me,' she said, gently. 'I should have become mad in the loneliness of this wretched place; but you, perhaps, may save me from the horrors of insanity.'

"I assured her that I would do all in my power to add to her comfort. I remembered that the marquis had told me my new mistress was mad, and that I was to take no heed of her words. I could not believe this, for she spoke with an air of perfect sanity.

"The old woman now appeared, carrying a delicate breakfast, neatly arrayed upon a silver salver. I placed this upon a table at the bedside, for my new mistress was too weak and ill to rise.

"'Sit down and breakfast with me,' said the young lady, pointing to a chair near the bed; 'you shall not be my servant, but my friend. I was once proud

and selfish, and thought that I should never know what it was to need a friend; but sorrow has taught me a terrible lesson.'

"She relapsed into silence, but she scarcely ate anything. A few spoonfuls of coffee and a morsel of bread were all she took; then, pushing her cup from her, she cried, in a tone of utter despair: —

"'O merciful Heaven! when wilt thou have pity upon my miseries? When will death release me from an existence that is too painful to bear?'

"I looked at her half compassionately, half wonderingly; her glance met mine, and she smiled mournfully.

"'You think me mad,—do you not?' she said. 'You have been told that I am mad, perhaps?'

"I cast down my eyes, and did not speak. Unaccustomed to deception, I knew not how to utter a falsehood.

"'Your silence answers me better than words could do,' exclaimed my young mistress. 'Yes, you have been told that I am mad, in order that you should believe nothing that I say. My father has done this.'

"'Your father!' I cried.

"'Yes; my father, the marquis.'

"I now thought that this young girl must indeed be mad. She spoke of the marquis as her father, when I had heard that his second daughter had died some months before. My mistress looked at me earnestly, searchingly, as if she would have read my inmost thoughts, and it seemed that she had succeeded in doing so.

"'Yes,' she said, presently, 'I can understand what is passing in your mind, my poor child. You think that I must indeed be mad, though I have the cunning of insanity and know how to appear reasonable. I say I am the daughter of the marquis, although you know that the marquis has but one daughter, since Paulina's twin-sister is dead.'

"'Yes,' I replied; 'I have myself seen the monument which records the death of Mademoiselle Estella.'

"'That monument records a lie!' exclaimed the invalid, grasping my wrist in her white and wasted hand. 'Every word inscribed upon that marble tablet is a lie. Estella never died; she still lives; she lives a life to which death would be a welcome close. But Heaven refuses to be merciful to her, and death does not come.'

"'O merciful Providence!' I cried; 'you, then, are Estella Duvernay?'

"'No,' exclaimed the young girl, proudly; 'I am Estella Valancy, the wedded wife of Colonel Hector Valancy.'

"I uttered a half-stifled cry of horror. I remembered that which I had beheld in the prison-like cell, and I felt that Hector Valancy had been murdered by the father of his wife. And yet was I justified in believing this wild and improbable story? Had I not seen the monument of Mademoiselle Estella? Had I not heard the description of her funeral from the servants of the chateau, who had all been present at the mournful ceremony?

"I thought of this, and, for a time, I felt disposed to believe that the marquis had told me the truth, and that this unhappy girl was indeed mad.

"'Listen to me,' exclaimed my mistress, laying her hand once more on mine, — 'listen to me, I implore you, and if you hope for mercy yourself in your own day of need, be merciful to me. My father has told you that I am mad, because he would not have you believe the dark story which I can tell. I do not ask you to credit me immediately when I tell you that I am as sane as yourself; but put me to any test you please, and you will find that I have spoken the truth. I am very ill, and a trial is before me which I may never survive. I am about to become a mother, and the future welfare of an innocent being may depend upon my leaving a record of my own story, — a record of my lawful marriage, and of the stainlessness of the name which will belong to my child.'

"There was something in the tone with which these words were spoken that was very far removed from madness. I could no longer disbelieve my young mistress. Had I not beheld awful evidences of the cold-blooded villany of the marquis? and could I doubt that he would be capable of any crime to serve his own dark ends?

"'Will you be the guardian of a mother's testimony?' said my mistress; 'will you save my sinless child from the ignominy his grandfather may seek to cast upon him?'

"'I will, madame,' I answered with enthusiasm; 'I will do all you bid me, and will aid you to the uttermost of my power.'

"The invalid raised herself from the pillows upon which she reclined, and pressed her pale lips to my forehead.

"'Heaven will reward you for your goodness,' she said, gently; 'for Heaven always especially rewards those who help the helpless.'

"She pointed to an elegant little desk in one corner of the apartment, and bade me bring it to the bedside. I did so; and, at my mistress's command, took out paper and pens, and prepared to write what she should dictate to me.

"'I have never spoken to the old woman who has attended me until now,' said my mistress, 'for I knew that she was ignorant and foolish, and that she could be easily bribed to silence; but I trust you,—may I not?'

"'Yes, madame,' I answered,—'with your life, if it were necessary.'

"'I trust you with more,' answered the young widow, with dignity,—'I trust you with my child's best heritage,—a stainless name! I am going to dictate to you the story of my life. You will guard the written record of that dark story, and will produce it at the fitting time,—will you not?'

"'I will, madame.'

"My young mistress remained silent for some moments, as if collecting her thoughts, and then began her story, I writing at her dictation.

"'I need tell you but little of my early youth,' she said; 'Paulina and I were twin-sisters; we loved each other well enough, but we were both tainted with that pride of birth which has been the curse of our race, and that pride was far stronger than affection. Either of us would have sacrificed the other to the honor of our family name.

"'My father, the marquis, had instilled this feeling into our hearts and minds at such an early age, that it seemed to have grown with our growth, and strengthened with our strength, until it had become a part of ourselves.

"'There was but one other sentiment which he had taken care to teach us, and that was a deep-rooted and undying hatred of the house of Valancy.

"'The families of Valancy and Duvernay had been rivals and enemies for upwards of seven centuries. The record of each race was stained with blood, shed by the murderous hand of the other. It was impossible that such a breach could ever be healed. It was utterly impossible that the hatred which had existed in the breast of every true Duvernay for seven centuries could ever be changed to any less terrible feeling.

"'The deeds of murder and violence which had darkened the records of the Middle Ages had not ceased with the advance of civilization. My father's younger and beloved brother had fallen in a duel with Hector Valancy, then a lieutenant in the army. This event had occurred when my sister and I were only six years old; but, children as we were, my father had made us kneel before the crucifix in his oratory, and swear undying hatred for Hector Valancy and all his race.

"'We had never seen any member of the Valancy family, though their chateau was within fifteen miles of our own home. The quarrel between Hector Valancy and my uncle, Armaud Duvernay, had occurred in Paris, where the two young men had often met.

"'Years passed, but the hatred which my father had taught us, and the pride of race which he had instilled into our infant minds, did not pass away. We grew to womanhood, and the world taught us that we were beautiful. My father framed ambitious schemes for us, and hoped to win us husbands whose names would even add lustre to that of Duvernay. In my case he was peculiarly successful, for the Duke de Vefour Vachette made an offer for my hand.

"'You know the social law of France. The future wife is very rarely consulted as to the choice of

her husband. The man whom she must swear to love, honor, and obey, is chosen for her by another.

"'It may be that the vows are false which are spoken at Heaven's altar, but the pride of a great name is perhaps preserved by the sacrifice of a broken heart.

"'It was thus, doubtless, that my father reasoned when he presented to me the Duke de Vefour Vachette.

"'I submitted, for I was well schooled. The duke was thirty years older than myself, but I dared not utter any objection to the proposed alliance. Providentially for me, I was considered too young to marry, and the wedding was postponed for a year; but I was betrothed to the duke in the presence of the most brilliant assemblage which Paris could muster.

"'A few weeks after my betrothal I had an alarming illness, — a fever, which confined me to my bed for more than a month, and during which my life was despaired of. I recovered, but, as I was still very weak, my father sent me upon a visit to my mother's sister, Madame de Marne, — a most amiable lady, who lived at a delightful chateau in the south of France.

"'I thus escaped from Paris, and from the society of my future bridegroom, whose presence was hateful to me.

"'My aunt received me with open arms. I loved her as I might have loved the mother I had never known, and I was thoroughly happy with her. I quickly recovered my health and strength, and in a few weeks I was well enough to attend the gay assemblies at a watering-place close to the chateau, which at this season of the year was thronged with fashionable visitors.

"'At a ball at this place I met the man who was to change the current of my destiny. This man was Hector Valancy, the soldier by whose sword my uncle, Armaud Duvernay, had fallen.

"'It was the old story, — I saw him, and I loved him before I knew his fatal name. Our hearts instinctively bounded towards each other, as if predestined to be united by a tie that even death would be powerless to sever. I loved him, and he fully returned my affection; but, owing to a variety of trifling circumstances, which I need not pause to describe, it was some time before we learned each other's names.

"'When we did learn the dreadful truth, it was too late. The hand of destiny was upon us. We loved, and we could no longer remember the old lesson of hatred. I was pledged, heart and soul, by the most solemn vow, — the silent bond of the heart, — to the man whose hand was stained with my uncle's blood.

"'My aunt had never heard the dark story of our house. She knew little of my father, for his reserved and haughty nature admitted of no confidence. She did know, however, of my engagement to the duke; but she was romantic and tender-hearted; she had lost the husband of her choice in early youth. She sympathized with our sorrows, she countenanced our betrothal, she even went yet further, and consented to our secret marriage.

"'Within two months of that marriage, — after a few weeks of happiness such as only pure and undivided love can give, happiness in which I forgot my broken vows, my father's anger, all except my love for the husband of my heart, — within two months of our wedding-day, Hector Valancy received an order to assume the command of a regiment about to start for Algeria.

"'He came, pale and death-like, to bring these tidings to her to whose heart he knew they would strike terror and despair. He could not speak, but handed the order, which he had just received from the minister of war, to my aunt, and it was from her lips that I learned the cruel news.

"'Then my husband's fortitude returned to him; he clasped me in his arms, and implored me to be brave as a soldier's wife should be.

"'"It will be but a brief parting," he said; "six months, dearest, at furthest; and your dear aunt will protect you from every danger, and from every sorrow in my absence."

"'But if you should fall, Hector! if I should lose you!' I gasped, scarcely able to utter the words.

"'He clasped me to his heart, and stifled those despairing words with his kisses.

"'"My own,—my dearest!" he exclaimed, "death cannot be so merciless as to part us in the bright dawn of our love!"

"'Why should I dwell upon this scene! He left us, and I was alone with my aunt.

"'But I was with one who loved me; and I was not without comfort in my hour of sorrow.

"'"You shall never return to your cruel father," my aunt said to me. "I have encouraged you in your disobedience against him, and I, therefore, am responsible for your future happiness. You shall remain with me, my dear child. I am rich, and can leave you a handsome fortune when I die."

"'I embraced this dear aunt, who had been more than a mother to me. Sheltered by her affection, I felt that I need scarcely fear the father whose pride I knew to be far stronger than his love.

"'But sometimes a sentiment of terror took possession of me, when I remembered the awful step which I had taken. Secretly married to the hated enemy of my race, what mercy could I expect from the parent who had formed such ambitious views, and who looked forward to the elevation of his haughty name by its union with that of De Vefour Vachette?

"'It was only my love for the husband of my choice that could dispel these gloomy thoughts; but I had still greater sorrow in my anxious fears for my beloved Hector's safety; and even the patient kindness and tenderness of my aunt could not dispel this grief.

"'The days passed,—slowly, as it seemed to my anxious mind, but still only too rapidly; for about two months after the colonel's departure, my father wrote to command my immediate return to the Chateau Duvernay.

"'This letter threw me into a terrible state of agitation, and my aunt replied, with perfect truth, that I was too ill to leave her house.

"'The marquis seemed satisfied with this answer, and I was allowed to remain in peace under the roof beneath which I had been so happy.

"'About this time I received a letter from Hector, telling me that he expected to return to France in three months from that time; and I began to count the days, and even the hours, which must elapse before I should once more behold my beloved husband.

"'Alas! I little dreamed of the agonies which I should have to endure before that time came.

"'The worst misfortune that could befall me, happened to me within two months of my receipt of Hector's letter. My aunt, Madame de Marne, and my only friend and protector in the absence of my husband, died suddenly, and I was left utterly alone in the world, to face the vengeance of the father I had offended beyond all hope of forgiveness.

"'There was but one course left me in this terrible position, and that course was flight. I determined to lose not a moment in hurrying from my aunt's house and seeking an asylum in some out-of-the-way place, in which I might remain hidden from the vengeance of my father, until the return of my only natural protector, my husband, Hector Valancy.

"'I made all preparations for leaving the chateau; I ordered a post-chaise and four, which was to take me upon the first stage of my journey. And I wrote to my father, telling him of my aunt's death, while the vehicle waited in the court-yard below my window.

"'It was at dusk upon the day succeeding that of my terrible loss, that I wrote this letter. By the next morning's dawn, I hoped to be a hundred miles away from the chateau, in some remote village, where my father would never be able to find me.

"'What, then, was my terror of mind, when I heard a second post-chaise roll into the court-yard, and the voice of my father calling to the postilion to stop!

"'My heart sank within me, and I felt as if I should have fallen to the ground; but it was strange that, in spite of my terror, my senses did not leave me; indeed, every sense seemed

intensified by the agony which I endured. I looked round the room for some means of escape, as some sinking and despairing wretch may look for a plank to cling to when the waves of a furious ocean whelm him round. But there was only one outlet to the apartment, and I heard my father's step in the corridor outside. I could not leave my chamber without meeting him face to face. It was too late; too late for escape, — too late for hope. I could but remain and confront my destiny.

"'My father entered, but he was not alone; he dragged my aunt's steward, an old man, into the chamber after him; and I could see that the face of the marquis was white and ghastly with terrible rage.

"'"Estella Duvernay," he said, in a voice which was all the more terrible for its unnatural calmness, "I come to demand the meaning of an enigma. I ask this man for my child, and he told me that he would conduct me to Madame Valancy. Who is Madam Valancy?"

"'My aunt's household had been informed of my marriage, — for I was about to become a mother, and it was necessary for my own honor that they should be told my secret.

"'I fell on my knees at my father's feet, and told him all, imploring his forgiveness in the most piteous terms, and sobbing as if my heart would have burst.

"'I cannot tell you, — for you, child, know not the power of the demon pride when it has once obtained the mastery of the human mind, — I cannot tell you the horrors of the scene which followed my confession. I grow mad almost when I remember that terrible hour. Enough, then, that my father dragged me fainting and insensible to my post-chaise, and that, when I recovered consciousness, I found myself through the darkness upon my way to the Chateau Duvernay.

"'It was daybreak when I reached this accursed house. My white face alarmed the servant who admitted us, and he ventured to ask whether Mademoiselle Estella was not very ill. My father replied in the affirmative. "She is ill, — dying, I fear," he said, in a low voice, to the old servant who had known me from a baby. I knew not then the motive of those strange words; but I soon learned to understand it fully.

"'The marquis dragged rather than led me to his own apartments. I sank, half fainting, upon a sofa. My father told the servant who had admitted us to seek Paulina, and send her to us immediately.

"'"If she has not yet arisen, she must lose no time in rising," he said; "her sister is very ill, and has need of her assistance."

"'These words almost reassured me; I thought that my father's obdurate heart had melted towards me at last, and that he would allow me the comfort of a sister's friendship and sympathy.

"'I soon learned how cruelly I had been mistaken. Paulina entered the room, fresh and beautiful, in a loose morning robe of white muslin.

"'She uttered an exclamation as she saw me, and was about to hurry towards me, when she was stopped by a commanding gesture of my father.

"'"Stay," he said; "it is as well you should know what this woman is, before you extend your compassion towards her."

"'My sister gazed at him with a glance of unmitigated astonishment.

"'"Paulina," said my father, sternly, "you are engaged to be married to an Englishman, a proud man, and justly proud, for his race is as ancient as our own, and his escutcheon as untarnished as that of the house of Duvernay. You love him, — do you not, child?"

"'"Love him!" exclaimed Paulina, clasping her hands, "better than my life, — better than my soul perhaps."

"'"Do you think that he would marry you if there were any blot upon your name?" asked the marquis; "do you think he would wed you if there were any shameful stain upon your race?"

"'"No, father," answered Paulina, "I know that he would not; for, strong as his love may be, his pride is even still stronger. But why do you ask this question?"

"'"Because your sister — that wo-

man yonder, whom I henceforth refuse to acknowledge as my daughter — has disgraced the name of Duvernay," answered the marquis.

"'He then told my sister a cruel and deliberate falsehood. He told her that I was not married; and, when I contradicted his vile words, he turned upon me and asked me if I could produce any proof of my marriage.

"'I could not do so. The ceremony had been performed in secret at the chapel of an obscure little village twenty miles from my aunt's house. The only witness of the marriage was Madame de Marne, and any documents that might have proved it were in the possession of my husband.

"'"Wait until Hector returns from Algiers!" I exclaimed, wildly, "he will declare my innocence; he will avenge himself upon those who dare to slander me."

"'"If Hector Valancy crosses the threshold of this dwelling he comes to his death," said my father; "but this is folly. The name of Valancy is but an excuse to cover your shame. Think you, Paulina," he cried, turning to my sister, "that this girl would dare to wed the murderer of her uncle? or can you believe that Valancy, the proud soldier, whose haughty insolence has defied us for years, would forget his hereditary hatred of our race, and suffer himself to be ensnared by a woman's beauty? No, Paulina, your sister has disgraced us, and there is but one way by which you can be saved from the bitter shame of being cast off by the man you love."

"'"Cast off!" exclaimed Paulina, who had grown as pale as myself, "no, no; I could not bear it. I cannot resign him."

"'"Then your sister must die!" said the marquis, sternly.

"'"Die!" cried Paulina.

"'"Yes, to the world she must die. She may live, if she will, — live on to gray hairs and old age, — but she must live nameless, obscure, and forgotten. The world must be told that Estella Duvernay is dead. The world must admire the costly monument that records her death. Below this chateau there are vaults, in which, in ages past, prisoners have existed for years, unheeded and unknown. In these vaults I will make a home for this girl, luxurious as any that she has been accustomed to, but far removed from any prying eye. There let her live until she has been forgotten; and when that day comes, she may return to a world which will not be able to recognize her as Estella Duvernay. Bid your sister farewell, Paulina; you will never see her again."

"'"Paulina!" I exclaimed, appealing despairingly to my sister, — "Paulina, you will not surely suffer this? I am innocent — I swear to you that I am innocent of this cruel charge. I am the wife, the lawfully wedded wife of Hector Valancy. Paulina, hear me! intercede for me! save me!"

"'"Remember that Sir Harvey Oswald is a proud man," my father said, in a low voice.

"'My sister was silent.

"'Half an hour afterwards I was taken to this vault, which was then a dungeon-like place, but which has since been made what you see it by the English steward, Andrew Burton.'"

CHAPTER LIII.

AT THE MASQUERADE.

THE *fete* given by the Marchioness of Crompton was indeed almost like a vision of fairyland. The grounds which surrounded the rustic villa sloped down to the river. The broad, velvet-like lawn was studded by groups of magnificent trees, and luxuriant willows dipped their feathery and drooping branches into the clear water of the Thames. Nature herself had made this spot almost enchantingly beautiful; but upon this night the marchioness had called art to her aid, and had succeeded in rendering it a marvel of loveliness. A tiny Swiss village had been built in a secluded part of the grounds upon the border of the river, and here minstrels played and sang soft melodies, which floated harmoniously upon the night air.

Refreshments were arranged in the

tiny wooden chalets, and pretty-looking girls, in Swiss costume, attended to the wants of the masquers who strolled that way, and stopped to eat ices while they listened to the Swiss minstrels.

The grounds, which were very extensive, seemed much larger than they really were, under the mysterious influence of night. The lamps glittered everywhere amid the trees, and the popping of champagne corks was to be heard in the loneliest nooks of those lovely gardens.

The supper was to be given at a very late hour in the house; but all the dancing took place on the lawn, upon a platform which had been constructed for that purpose, and which was covered by a roof which seemed one canopy of flowers and lamps, that glittered like stars through the blossoms.

Upon the moonlit river gondolas were moored, attended by men dressed in Venetian costume, and lighted by colored lamps.

Report had scarcely exaggerated the splendor of the preparations for this *fete;* and it would have been impossicle to imagine greater loveliness than that of the assembled guests, whose brilliant costumes dazzled the eye wherever it glanced. But no form was more graceful than that of the Duchess of Arlington, whose snowy wings glanced hither and thither as she glided through a quadrille.

Most of the dancers wore their masks, and Blanche Mortimer felt that she was surrounded by those whose identity she could not discover.

To the guilty woman there was something terrible in this fancy. She knew not whose eyes might be upon her, glittering through the narrow openings of a mask.

The first quadrille in which the duchess had joined, concluded as the clock struck eleven. Blanche was conducted by her partner to an alcove, in which a gipsy girl was prophesying the destinies of the guests. The crowd about this alcove was very dense, and, in the confusion, the duchess contrived to drop the arm of her partner, and to disappear amongst the throng of maskers.

She hurried towards a spot in the grounds that was less brilliantly lighted than in other places. This was a shrubbery at the extreme end of the gardens, — a lonely corner of the grounds, which almost resembled a wood, and which had been comparatively overlooked by those who had planned the decorations for the marchioness's *fete.* Here the small red lamps glimmered amidst the branches of the trees, but they gave little light. Upon the river bank a Swiss landing-stage was also lighted, but so dimly, that few of the gondolas paused at it.

The drooping willows cast a gloomy shade over the water upon this lonely shore; and even with lights and music, and every sound and sign of revelry near at hand, the spot had a dismal aspect. It was hither that the duchess came, after escaping from the attentions of her partner. She crept with a light and stealthy step along the smooth grass upon the river bank; but it was to be observed that, rapidly as she went, she counted the willows as she passed them, muttering the number of each tree beneath her breath. At the thirteenth willow she paused and listened.

"At a quarter past eleven they will be here," she murmured.

She waited for some moments, and she did not wait in vain. The regular strokes of a pair of oars in the quiet waters met her ears.

"They are coming," she said.

Five minutes afterwards a boat pushed into the shore. It did not stop at the landing-stage, which was only about ten yards from the spot on which the duchess stood, but it paused close against the trunk of the thirteenth willow. Two men landed, and the boatman rowed rapidly away. Not a word had been uttered upon either side.

One of the men approached the duchess, whose brilliant costume glittered through the darkness.

This man wore the dress of a fisherman, or smuggler. He had on a heavy, rough jacket, a red woollen shirt, loose trousers, high black boots, and a gaudy scarf twisted round his waist. Noth-

ing could be less conspicuous than this dress.

His companion was tall and stately in appearance; but the outline of his figure was entirely concealed by a long and voluminous robe of white cashmere, made in the Arab fashion.

Both the men wore masks which covered the whole of their faces.

"It is you, Philip?" whispered the duchess, addressing herself to the man in the fisherman's costume.

"Yes, your Grace."

"And your companion is?"

"Your Grace's courier, Giovanni Baptista, who is, as your Grace is aware, deeply interested in your welfare."

The duchess shuddered.

"You both know what to do?" she asked.

"Yes, your Grace. We are only to watch, and to be ready, should our services be needed."

"Precisely so. One of you will keep near me wherever I go," answered the duchess; "but as I have reason to believe that the duke may be present at the ball, you will make it your business to observe all the maskers, and, if possible, discover his Grace, under whatever disguise he may endeavor to conceal himself. If you discover him, one of you will take care to watch him closely for the remainder of the evening. You understand, Philip?"

"Yes, your Grace," answered the footman, "I perfectly understand."

"And you will make your companion understand also?"

"I will, your Grace."

"Then there is only one thing more," said the duchess. "Mr. Percival Holmwood, the millionnaire, will most likely be here. Keep your eye upon him as well as upon the duke, if possible; and, if you see the two conversing together, give me an early warning of the fact."

"I will take care to do so, your Grace."

"Have you brought any disguise with you?"

"Yes, your Grace," answered Philip; "Giovanni has your black silk domino hidden under the folds of his cloak."

"Enough. We separate now, then, for the rest of the night; and remember that you do not address me unless there is some necessity for doing so."

Philip Howland bowed, and withdrew with his companion. The two figures glided silently away beneath the trees. The white-robed form of the courier seemed strangely ghostlike in the darkness.

"An ominous and an evil shadow!" murmured the duchess, as she watched that receding figure; "ominous of shame and terror to me. What is to become of me? What is to become of the unhappy wretch whose crime has placed her forever in the power of those two men? O Heaven! who would sin against thee, if thy erring creatures could but know, while yet innocent, the penalty of the guilty? But it is only when their hands are stained with blood that they can fully know the terror of crime."

Blanche Mortimer glided away from the brink of the still water; but before she quitted the shore, she looked earnestly at the dark surface of the river.

"Would it not be better to end all beneath that hurrying tide?" she murmured. "The dark river might keep the secret of my crime. And yet,—no, no!" she exclaimed, proudly; "they would discover all, perhaps, if I were dead. The wretches whom I have trusted would reveal my crime, and slander my memory. It is only by living that I can defy them."

The duchess returned to the brilliantly-lighted lawn and once more mingled with the maskers. The object of the gay and light-hearted masqueraders was to conceal their identity as much as possible. The guests perpetually addressed each other by the names they guessed at, in spite of the cleverest disguise. Sometimes a lovely girl was discovered by the silvery tones of her voice; sometimes a haughty colonel, who had disguised himself as a chimney-sweep, was recognized by his stately walk. Nothing could exceed the fun and frolic of the brilliant assembly. It is not to be supposed that the high-born and wealthy are free from care and trouble, but people seemed that night to cast their anxieties to the winds, and to give them-

selves up to the enjoyment of the festival.

But the terrors of guilt can never be cast aside. They are not to be forgotten even for a moment. The Duchess of Arlington carried her ghastly secret wherever she went amidst that gay assembly, and a haunting shadow was always close beside her.

It seemed to-night as if that shadow had taken an earthly form, for, in obedience to her commands, she was accompanied wherever she went by one of her servants. The white-robed figure of the courier, the so-called Italian, Giovanni Baptista, was always near her.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE MEETING IN THE LONELY COTTAGE BY THE WATER SIDE.

The duke rode down to Twickenham in obedience to the strange and anonymous summons which he had received.

He went down on horseback, in order that he might take no witness of his visit, so that if anything occurred which concerned the duchess, there should be no one near to hear her name slandered.

The dark shadow of doubt was heavy upon the mind of Gerald Mortimer. Noble, generous, and trusting as was the duke's nature, he had been cruelly tried, and it was becoming terribly difficult for him to banish his growing doubts of the woman he had so tenderly loved.

"Why do those people thus persistently slander her?" he thought; "is it indeed a base plot? But what end can they hope to gain by this infamous scheme? What reason have they to try and injure the loveliest of women? Some rejected suitor, perhaps, may thus seek to destroy the woman who scorned him. It must be so it must be so! I cannot think my Blanche guilty of the lightest sin, how much less of the horrible crime of which these wretches accuse her! I will believe in her and trust her to the last, and it shall be my business to unravel this mystery."

The duke rode past the villa of the marchioness. He saw the blaze of lights in the grounds, and heard the crash of the magnificent band, as it sounded the first notes of a waltz, but he galloped onwards and onwards to the spot which had been indicated to him in the anonymous letter.

About a half a mile from the villa he slackened his rein, for he perceived the dark figure of a man standing motionless upon the footpath, and he felt instinctively that this man was one of those who had summoned him.

He was not mistaken; as he drew near to the motionless figure, a voice cried: —

"If you are the Duke of Arlington, stop! you are close to the end of your journey."

The night was dark, for the moon, which was to appear in full splendor an hour later, had not yet risen, but the duke was yet able to see that the man was dressed in black from head to foot, and that the upper part of his face was covered by a mask.

"I am the Duke of Arlington," answered Gerald, proudly.

The masked stranger advanced from the footpath, and took the bridle of the duke's horse.

"With your Grace's permission," he said, politely, "I will lead your horse the rest of the way."

"As you will," the duke answered, quietly. "I am here to go with you wherever you will. But I warn you that I come armed, and that I am determined to sift this matter to the bottom, and to do my uttermost towards discovering the wicked motive of this vile plot."

The stranger laughed aloud.

"Your Grace is chivalrous," he said; "but the time is not far at hand when you will thank me, and those who aid me, for the trouble we have taken in our endeavors to open your eyes to a dreadful truth. If there be any wickedness in the wish to convince a good man of the guilt of the base woman he cherishes and trusts in, I confess to that wickedness; but I solemnly believe that I am only doing my duty."

The duke sighed, and a feeling that was almost akin to despair crept through

his heart. There was something in the speaker's tone that seemed like truth, — truth spoken by an upright and honorable man.

"But why do you hide your face and conceal your name?" he asked. "You who slander a woman should at least not shelter yourself beneath a disguise. There is something cowardly in stabbing from behind a mask."

"I must be content to seem a coward, then, until your Grace knows me better," the man answered, quietly.

They had by this time reached a point in the road at which a narrow lane led down to the water's edge. The stranger turned into this lane, leading the duke's horse very carefully through the narrow opening.

Upon a wooden board, nailed against a post at the entrance to this lane, there was the announcement of a house to let.

The lane was not a long one, and Gerald Mortimer felt by the fresh coolness of the night air which blew upon his face, that they were drawing near the brink of the river.

As he felt this, the stranger suddenly stopped at a dilapidated looking wooden gate, nailed against one of the posts of which there was another board, similar to that at the entrance of the lane.

It was at an empty house, therefore, that the stranger stopped.

The duke remembered his midnight interview in Kale Court, which had also occurred in an empty house. But he made no remark, and the stranger opened the gate and led the horse into a neglected garden.

"The stables belonging to this place are not fit for use," the man said; "but if your Grace will tie the bridle of your horse to one of these trees, he will be perfectly safe until you require him, and I will take care that he gets a good feed of corn."

The duke dismounted, and did as his guide directed him. He then followed him to a dreary-looking house, the windows of which were all dark.

The stranger opened a side door in the dismal and neglected-looking building, and led the way into a cheerless room, which contained no furniture beyond a table and a couple of chairs.

But there was plenty of light in this apartment, for two blazing torches were stuck in the rough wooden table. The shutters of the window were so closely barred that no gleam of this light was visible from without.

Gerald Mortimer had little time to examine the chamber, for his guide pointed to a ladder which communicated with a trap-door in the dilapidated ceiling of the room.

The stranger ascended this ladder, and the duke followed him. Upon passing through the trap-door, Gerald found himself in a room as dimly lighted as the attic in Kale Court.

He looked anxiously around him, and in the furthest corner of the chamber — which was evidently a large one, — he beheld a form whose presence sent a mysterious thrill through his heart.

Dimly visible in the obscurity of the room he saw the pale and shadowy figure which he had seen first in the attic in Kale Court, and, for the second time, in the West End Church, upon the eve of his bridal day.

For the third time in his life he beheld the WHITE PHANTOM.

But he felt no fear. His was one of those courageous and noble natures which are above all fear. He uttered no word, no cry of surprise, no exclamation of terror. He waited quietly until he should be addressed by her who had summoned him.

He had not long to wait.

"You do well, Gerald Mortimer," said a voice, whose every tone he recognized, — "you do well to obey my summons. You are summoned, for the third time, to receive a solemn warning. This time you will surely not refuse to accept that warning. You would not believe in that which you heard; perhaps you will credit that which you see."

"Woman," exclaimed the duke, sternly, "I believe that my happiness and peace of mind have been trifled with and plotted against, and that an innocent and high-born lady has been villanously traduced by you and your accomplices. If I find that it is so, I swear that I will have ample vengeance against you, and all who have aided you in this vile scheme. I have warned your companion, and I now warn you of my intention."

"Your grace has been deceived," answered the woman, in a somewhat mournful voice, "but not by me. Wait, and wait patiently, and you will find that I have spoken truly."

Again the duke started; for once more he recognized that tone of perfect truthfulness that can seldom be mistaken.

"Oh, if Blanche should have deceived me!" he thought; "if she should be base and wicked, what will become of me? What will become of me without her love?"

A church clock in the distance struck two, as these thoughts were in the duke's mind.

"It is the appointed hour," said the man, solemnly. "Now, your Grace, you have but to watch and to listen."

He knelt down and slid away a small portion of the flooring, revealing an opening of a foot square.

"This must be your Grace's point of observation," he said.

The duke bowed, and knelt down upon the spot from which the masked man had risen. Through the opening in the floor he was able to see plainly into the lighted room, but there was little chance of the opening being seen by any one below, as the ceiling was disfigured by crevices and patches of green damp.

"You may watch, but you will not be watched," the mask said.

The duke looked earnestly into the room below. It was as yet quite empty; but he had been told to watch, and he watched patiently.

He had been watching for about seven minutes when he heard a door open. A moment afterwards he saw two persons enter the room beneath him.

They were both masked. One was a man, who wore the costume of one of the sanguinary heroes of the French revolution. The other was a woman, who was wrapped from head to foot in a long black domino.

"Thank heaven!" thought the duke, "it is not Blanche. She wore a Psyche dress, and was covered with diamonds."

But in another moment the masked woman pushed the hood of her silk domino a little way back, and Gerald Mortimer recognized the diamond star which glittered amid the golden curls of his wife.

"Ah, misery! — it is she!" he murmured, in a tone of despair.

"Why have you brought me to this dismal place?" exclaimed the duchess, looking round the apartment with an expression of disgust.

"Because I have something to say to you which must not be overheard," returned her companion, who still wore his mask, but whose voice the duke recognized as that of the young millionnaire, Percival Holmwood.

The duchess removed her mask.

"This place is close and stifling," she said, contemptuously. "You might surely have chosen a better scene for our interview, Mr. Holmwood."

"Who says that I am Mr. Holmwood?" said the mask, in a strange tone.

"Your voice says so," answered the duchess.

"But voices are sometimes alike," replied the mask. "You might be mistaken in that."

"But I am not mistaken," replied Blanche Mortimer, with decision. "Come, come, pray do not let us waste time upon any foolish prevarication. You told me that you have something of importance to say to me, or I should not have consented to accompany you here."

"I have to inform you of a peril which menaces you," returned the mask.

"What peril?"

"The peril of being accused of the murder of your lover, Hubert Monkton."

Gerald Mortimer expected that the duchess wonld start from her seat, angry and indigant, to repudiate the vile charge contained in these words; but she did not stir.

"Who accuses me?" she asked, in a hoarse, gasping voice.

"Yourself," answered the mask. "You are your own accuser; and the strongest accusation that exists against you is the evidence of your own handwriting, — the letters written by you to the murdered man, Hubert Monkton."

The face of the duchess grew ghastly white, and Gerald Mortimer could see that she was trembling violently.

"There are no such letters in existence," she said.

"There are," replied the mask, "and you know that there are. You would give all your fortune to possess them; and yet they were once offered to you, and you refused to take them."

The wretched woman trembled even more violently than before.

"I refused them," she gasped, "because—"

"Because they were offered to you by the dead," answered the mask, in a solemn voice. "Blanche Mortimer, Duchess of Arlington,—you whose place is amidst the proudest of England's aristocracy,—you who sometimes stand beside the throne of the purest queen in Christendom,—you who deceived the most generous of men by your false smiles, your hollow words,—you are the murderess of the man whose only crime was to love and trust you. The letters written by you to Hubert Monkton are still in existence; they prove the *motive* of your crime, and they are in the hands of those who will not scruple to use them whem the fitting time comes. But this is not all. In a wretched room, in one of the lowest haunts of Blackfriars, the rotting body of your murdered lover has been discovered by those who can and will attest to its discovery."

The guilty duchess uttered a long, wild shriek, and fell upon her knees at the feet of her accuser.

"Percival," she cried, "Percival Holmwood, why are you thus pitiless? Is it because I once deceived you that you persecute me thus? I was wrong—I was deluded by my mad ambition. I wished to wear a ducal coronet, and I sacrificed all to win that wish. But think you that I loved Gerald Mortimer? No, no, I loved him not. I fooled him by false words, and he was weak enough to believe that I loved him. Percival, have pity upon me! have pity! Do not denounce me. You once loved me, and I refused to hear your prayers. I refuse no longer. I will abandon all—all—if you will have it so. I will fly *with you to some* foreign land, where I may bear your name and be your bride. Percival, you once loved me, do not scorn me now—now that I am at your feet, supplicating for mercy."

Had the duchess been less agitated by the terrible agony of fear, she might have heard a stifled groan of despair that was uttered in the chamber above.

The one bright dream of Gerald Mortimer's life had been broken! The mask had fallen! He now knew the nature of the woman he had loved and trusted.

But the wretched creature, grovelling upon the ground, did not hear that groan of despair.

"I have told you before that you are mistaken, Blanche Mortimer," said the mask, in a cold and pitiless voice; "I am not Percival Holmwood."

"Not Percival Holmwood?" repeated the duchess, in a tone of utter bewilderment; "who, then, are you?"

"One whom you should have reason to remember," answered the man.

At the same moment he threw aside the black velvet mask that had covered his face. The red glare of the torches shone full upon that rigid and marble-like countenance.

A shriek of terror and despair burst from Blanche Mortimer's white lips, and she fell fainting on the rugged flooring of the chamber.

The face upon which she had looked was that which she had beheld in the opera-box in Paris. It was the face of Hubert Monkton, her murdered lover.

Her shriek had been overheard. Philip Howland had followed his mistress and her companion to the solitary house upon the river shore, but he had waited at a respectful distance from the empty dwelling, ready to attend upon the duchess should she require him.

He had heard her wild cry, and rushed to her assistance. He found her lying upon the floor at the feet of the stranger, who had resumed his black velvet mask.

Philip Howland raised the duchess in his arms, and carried her out into the open air.

The cool breeze from the river revived her; she opened her eyes, and gazed wildly round her.

"Kill him, Philip," she cried, in a

hoarse voice, as she recognized her servant and accomplice,—"kill him; he has returned to torment me; he has returned to denounce me! Kill him, and I will reward you more richly than I have ever yet rewarded you."

Philip Howland drew a pistol from his belt, and rushed towards the empty house. This man was thoroughly devoid of conscience. The place was lonely, as he thought, and the fit scene for a murder. The wretch cared little for what he did, so that he won another hold upon his guilty mistress, whose wealth was rapidly passing into his hands.

He rushed into the wretched chamber, and took a deliberate aim at the mask, who stood calm and motionless upon the other side of the table.

But, before Philip Howland could pull the trigger, the stranger flung aside his black velvet mask and a flaxen wig which had concealed his dark hair.

The servant uttered a cry of terror scarcely less wild and piercing than that which had burst from the lips of his mistress.

"The dead!" he cried,—"the murdered victim arisen from the grave to glare at me with his hollow eyes! Hide me from him!—hide me from him!"

He flung up his arms wildly, as if to shut out the sight of that dreaded face, and rushed from the building, staggering as he went.

It was thus that Gerald Mortimer learned the dark secret of his beautiful wife's history.

CHAPTER LV.

PERCIVAL'S PARENTAGE REVEALED.

Let us return to the mad-house at Wandsworth, and to the chamber in which Percival Holmwood sat by the bedside of the woman who alone could reveal the secret of his birth.

The day waned, and found Mrs. Burton still relating the history of the unhappy prisoner in the vaults of the Chateau Duvernay. It grew so late that Percival became uneasy when he remembered that Aurora and Lilian were waiting for them, and he was obliged to leave Mrs. Burton with the promise that he would return early the next morning to hear the remainder of her story.

It is needless to say that he kept his promise. He suffered intense anxiety during the interval, for he feared that the invalid might grow worse in the night; that her mind might, perhaps, wander, and that she might die without having had one lucid interval in which to reveal to him the secret of his birth.

Early the next morning he sought admittance to the lunatic asylum, and was at once conducted to Mrs. Burton's room. The doctor informed him, on the way to the invalid's chamber, that she had slept the previous night more peacefully than usual, and was quite composed enough to receive him.

"Thank Heaven," the young man ejaculated,—"thank Heaven for this. I shall yet discover the secret of my birth."

Mrs. Burton resumed her story almost immediately after the young millionnaire had taken his place by her side.

"I have not long to live," she said, "and I wish to lose no time in telling the secrets that have long been a heavy burden to my sonl. The time passed in the vaults beneath the Chateau Duvernay, but so monotonously, that I scarcely counted the days as they went by. The sun never penetrated those dreary chambers,—dreary in all their luxury, through the lack of that blessed light. The invalid grew worse and worse; but I dared not tell her the awful truth which I knew,—I dared not tell her that her husband, the man for whose sake she had braved her father's fury, had perished in one of those gloomy vaults which, in the Middle Ages, had been used as the secret dungeons of the chateau. I dared not tell her this; but in the middle of the night succeeding that upon which I had been brought to this underground abode, I was awakened by a strange and ominous sound in one of the vaults near that in which I slept.

"It was the sound of digging; and a cold shiver thrilled me to the inmost

soul. I guessed the meaning of that strange sound. It was the digging of the grave of Colonel Hector Valancy.

"The marquis rarely descended to the vaults in which I lived with my young mistress; but Andrew Burton came every day to bring all that was necessary for the small household. The doctor also came very frequently to visit his patient, and when at last her hour of trial drew near, he took up his abode entirely in a vault close to that which we occupied, and waited patiently for the coming of the time at which his services would be needed.

"That time came at last, and one was born to the wretched and widowed mother. It was a period of great anxiety, for Madame Valancy's life was for some time in considerable danger, and the life of the infant flickered like the flame of a newly-lighted candle. But both were saved,—though, Heaven knows, I sometimes thought at that time that it would be better for both had they perished.

"When the child was a week old, the marquis paid us one of his rare visits; but he did not even enter the chamber in which his daughter lay, only lately snatched from the jaws of the grave. He remained in the boudoir, and sent for me to attend him there.

"I entered the room, and found him seated at the lamplit table.

"'Good-evening, Mademoiselle Marie,' he said; 'I have something of importance to say to you. You are rather tired of your new place by this time, I dare say.'

"I could scarcely conceal my execration of this man when I remembered his cruelty towards his daughter, but I answered him as politely as I could; for I knew that which was known to all who ever entered the chateau, — I knew that it was fatal to offend the Marquis Duvernay.

"'I am tired of an abode in which I never see the sun, monsieur,' I said; 'yet there is another who must be more tired, and who has suffered far more than I have ever had to endure.'

"The marquis knew what I meant, but he only looked at me with a contemptuous smile.

"'You will be glad to change your place,' he said, 'since you are so tired of it. I am going to send you to Paris.'

"'To Paris, monsieur!' I exclaimed; 'but you will not surely send me away from my young mistress when she has so much need of my services?'

"'That question is for me to decide,' the marquis answered, haughtily. 'You will leave this place to-night, and you will start at twelve o'clock for Paris, under the escort of my steward, Andrew Burton.'

"'But for what purpose, monsieur?' I asked.

"'In order that you may place the child, who was born here a week ago, under the care of the nurse whom I have chosen to rear it.'

"'What, monsieur!' I exclaimed; 'you will take the child away from its heart-broken mother?'

"'Most decidedly,' answered the marquis, coldly. 'The lady of whom you speak has chosen her pathway in life. She must resign herself to endure its troubles. The child will start for Paris this night. If you are so fond of your mistress, it will, perhaps, be some consolation to you to place her child in the hands of those who are to have the charge of him. If you refuse to do this, there are others who will obey me; and indeed, for the matter of that, the child can go alone under the care of Andrew Burton.'

"This decided me. How could I abandon the innocent infant to the care of a man whom I only knew as the merciless and unscrupulous tool of a wicked master? My duty to my mistress must surely prompt me to protect her helpless offspring.

"'If the child is to be taken from his mother's arms, I will go with him, monsieur,' I said; and then falling on my knees before the marquis, I lifted my clasped hands in an attitude of supplication towards him. 'O monsieur,' I cried, 'have pity upon your wretched daughter. Her heart has already been almost broken by your cruelty; her husband, her brave and generous husband, has been murdered, ay, murdered as foully as if his life had been taken by violence or poison. Have pity upon her then, monsieur;

leave her her child, the only hope that is now left to her, the only hope, monsieur, the only consolation, Leave her in this dismal underground abode if the spirit of revenge is strong enough to prompt you to such cruelty, but do not leave her alone; for pity's sake, monsieur, for pity's sake.'

"Alas! I might as well have appealed to the stone walls which surrounded me!'

"'Get up, girl, get up,' said the marquis, sternly. 'What mad folly is this? The Marquis Duvernay is not accustomed to be lectured by his servants. You have made yourself remarkably wise, it seems, upon the subject of my family affairs, but I would warn you to have a care how you boast of your knowledge. Such knowledge is apt to be dangerous. The child will be taken from this place, and carried upon the first stage to Paris this night. It is for you to decide whether you will accompany the infant, or whether you will remain here.'

"'I will go with the child, monsieur,' I answered.

"'You have chosen wisely,' replied the marquis. 'Remember that I have before told you, you will be well rewarded for your trouble.'

"'Rewarded!' I exclaimed; 'No, monsieur, I will take no reward from your guilty hands. The money would seem stained with blood, and could bring nothing but curses with it.'

"Ah, how truly have those words been realized!

"The marquis smiled scornfully.

"'It is now nine o'clock,' he said; 'you will have the infant ready at midnight, and you will wait quietly here until Andrew Burton comes to fetch you.'

"'But how am I to take the child from his unhappy mother, monsieur?' I asked: 'there will be a fearful scene.'

"'There will be no scene whatever,' replied the marquis, coldly; 'Doctor Servin will have taken good care of that.'

"I could not understand the meaning of these words, but at this moment the doctor, who had been in the chamber of my mistress during my interview with the marquis, came out of the invalid's room and approached his wicked enployer.

"'Madame is sleeping very peacefully,' he said, with a strange smile upon his wrinkled complexion, 'and will doubtless remain in a profound slumber for some hours after midnight.'

"After uttering these words, the doctor and his master departed.

"The truth began to dawn upon me. These wretches had doubtless given Madame Valancy a sleeping draught, in order that the infant might be taken without difficulty from its unconscious mother.

"I returned to the bedchamber. My unhappy mistress was sleeping more profoundly than she had done for a long time, and I knew that this was no natural slumber. The baby lay by her side, encircled with her beautifully rounded arm; her long dark hair streamed loosely over her pillow, and her face was pale as marble.

"'Sleep, unhappy mother!' I murmured, as I watched her; 'sleep, afflicted one. It is, perhaps, the last peaceful slumber you will know until you rest in the grave.'"

"But if you pitied her thus, why did you consent to rob her of her child?" exclaimed Percival Holmwood, interrupting the speaker. "Why did you not brave all, and defy the marquis, rather than betray this wretched mother?"

"Ah! why, indeed?" murmured Mrs. Burton, sadly. "I have often asked myself that question, and the burden of my sin has rested very heavily upon my conscience. That secret and other secrets have preyed upon my mind until they have well-nigh driven me mad. And yet what could I have done? How could I resist the power of a demon whose wealth secured him the help of tools as base and unscrupulous as himself? What was I but a weak girl, powerless to help myself or others? Do you think the Marquis Duvernay would have hesitated to bury me alive in one of the dungeons of the chateau if I had dared to oppose his will? Do you think that he who had condemned the brave Colonel Hector Valancy to a slow and lingering death

would have hesitated to rid himself of a servant girl, if she dared to cross his path?"

"True, true," replied Percival; "forgive me, my poor soul, if I forget the perils which hemmed you in on every side. I have no doubt you acted for the best; but I cannot think without anguish of this poor unhappy mother."

"It is but right that you should think of her with sorrow," replied the sick woman. "Heaven forbid that you should think otherwise than tenderly of her, *you* above all other people. I thought that I acted for the best in determining to follow the child. I sat by the bed upon which my mistress lay, counting the moments as they passed, and thinking despairingly of the future. What was the marquis going to do with the child? Surely he would be merciful to a helpless infant, who had never offended him! I scarcely dared to think of the future. All seemed dark and hopeless — I could not look forward.

"At last the silvery chimes of the timepiece struck the half hour after eleven. It was time for me to make my brief preparations. I did not even know the date of the month, for I had lost all note of time in the changeless monotony of my life, but I knew that we were in the middle of winter. I selected my warmest clothing, therefore, and dressed myself for travelling.

"Having done this, I approached the bed, and was about to take the child in my arms, when a thought struck me.

"The marquis, by a mock death and burial, and the erection of a monument that recorded a lie, had endeavored to destroy the identity of his daughter. He would, doubtless, also endeavor to destroy that of this new-born child, and to rob the infant of its noblest heritage, — an honest name.

"What could I, helpless as I was, do to prevent this?

"I knelt down beside the couch of the sleeping mother, and prayed that Heaven might inspire me with the means of helping this helpless baby.

"I arose, strangely comforted, — for *when* did ever earnest and heartfelt prayer fail to comfort those who have uttered it?

"I walked slowly round the room, reflecting upon all possible means of linking with the unconscious infant some clue to his identity, which might remain with him until he grew to be a man.

"I approached the dressing-table, and there, in an open casket, amidst a heap of trinkets which had been thrown carelessly aside, I found a miniature exquisitely painted on ivory.

"I scarcely knew whether it was the portrait of Estella or Paulina Duvernay, so perfect was the resemblance between the two sisters. But, in any case, I thought this miniature would serve my purpose, for it was the exact resemblance of the mother of the child that was about to be abandoned to strangers.

"The portrait was framed in massive gold, ornamented with a rim of small diamonds.

"'How can I hope that this will remain in the possession of a child?' I thought. 'What is more likely than that the value of the case may tempt the nurse to sell the portrait?'

"I considered for some minutes, scarcely knowing what to do.

"Then a happy thought struck me. I remembered that I had in my possession a locket containing my mother's hair. This locket was a paltry trinket of the commonest metal, that had been bought for a few shillings at a village fair.

"I took this locket from my box, and compared it with the miniature. They were very nearly of the same size.

"This was enough. I removed the ivory miniature from its valuable case, and took my poor mother's hair from the valueless locket in which it had been so long enclosed. But this was not enough. If the miniature should remain in the child's possession it might give him a clue to the identity of his father as well as that of his mother.

"I selected a small penknife from my mistress's dressing-case, and with the sharp point of the steel I scratched these words upon the back of the ivory miniature: —

"'THIS PORTRAIT IS PLACED BY ME, MARY ALGAR, IN THE POSSESSION OF THE NEWLY-BORN SON OF ESTELLA, DAUGHTER OF THE MARQUIS DUVERNAY, AND OF COLONEL HECTOR VALANCY, HER LAWFUL HUSBAND.'

"Having done this, I placed the miniature in the tarnished locket, which not even the most ignorant person could possibly have mistaken for gold.

"I then sewed the locket into one of the plainest under-garments of the child, but not until I had wrapped round it a sheet of paper inscribed with these words: —

"'*For the love of mercy do not rob a nameless child of his mother's portrait. It is of no value to any one except himself, but it may some day prove of inestimable value to him.*'

"I now felt that I had done almost all that I could do. I took the sleeping child in my arms, but before I dressed him for the journey I examined him, in order to see if there was any mark about him by which he might afterwards be recognized.

"I found a dark line upon his wrist, as if a strong hand had grasped the delicate flesh, and imprinted a bruise upon it.

"I knew the meaning of this mark. Upon that fatal day on which the marquis had discovered his daughter's secret, he had grasped her rudely by the wrist in his first outburst of fury.

"I knew that the child would carry this mark to its grave."

"Stay!" cried Percival Holmwood, once more interrupting the speaker, and tearing open his linen wristband as he spoke; "look, look! this is the mark, — is it not?"

He held out his wrist before the dim eyes of the invalid.

"Yes, yes," answered Mary Burton. "That is the very mark which I saw upon the baby's wrist. But it needed not that to tell me that you are the son of Hector Valancy. You have your father's face. I saw that face but once, and then it was rigid in the marble stillness of death; but I can recognize its every feature in yours. You are the nameless child of Hector Valancy."

"Yes; but not much longer to be nameless," exclaimed Percival, resolutely. "I will vindicate my mother's good name. Yes, if it cost me every penny of my fortune, every hour of my life to accomplish the task, I will avenge the wrongs that were inflicted upon my unhappy mother by her unnatural father and by her heartless sister."

"The wrongs done her by her sister have been already avenged, — cruelly and terribly avenged," the invalid answered, gravely.

"What mean you?"

"I have a long story yet to tell," murmured Mrs. Burton, "but let me tell it my own way. These interruptions confuse and bewilder me."

"Forgive me," said Percival, kindly, "I will not again interrupt you. I will listen quietly and patiently to whatever you may tell."

"I wrapped the infant in a velvet cloak of his mother's; the cloak was large, and lined throughout with the richest fur, and I felt that whatever the weather, the child would be well protected from cold. I gathered together his clothes, and packed them in a small portmanteau; but I took nothing but a change of linen for myself, for the marquis had told me that I should return to my mistress. Having finished my preparations, I waited patiently for the coming of the steward.

"The old woman had been informed of my departure, and had been told that it would be her duty to attend to the invalid during my absence.

"Five minutes after twelve I heard a key turn in the lock of the outer vault, and a few moments afterwards I heard the step of the steward in the boudoir.

"I went to him immediately, after casting one regretful look at the unconscious sleeper, who must too surely awake to despair.

"The steward was muffled to the eyes in a huge great-coat and an immense woollen comforter.

"'I suppose you have wrapped yourself up well,' he said. 'It is a bitter night.'

"'It cannot be so bitter as the cruelty of those who would expose this helpless child to its severity,' I answered.

"Andrew Burton laughed scornfully.

"'Oh, as for that,' he said, 'I don't

suppose the cold weather will hurt the child; and if the frost and snow were to kill the brat, I don't imagine that any one would care very much about it.'

"'Wretch!' I exclaimed; 'its unhappy mother would care.'

"'Would she?' muttered the steward; 'the more fool she, then, for it will be of but little difference to her whether the child lives or dies. Alive or dead, she will never see it again, so she may make herself easy upon that score.'

"What could I say to such a heartless brute as this? I looked at him in silent scorn, and with the child, who had been drugged like his mother, and was still sleeping, nestled in my arms, I followed the steward from the dreary abode to which I was never to return.

"We made our way along the gloomy stone corridors, ascended the secret staircase, and entered the marquis's room. After we had passed through the opening which communicated with this chamber, the steward pressed the spring, the cabinet returned to its place, and it would have been impossible for any one, not acquainted with the secret, to have discovered the hidden communication with the vaults below.

"A pile of logs blazed upon the open hearth, and wax candles were burning in the silver sconces, but the marquis was not in the apartment.

"'Monsieur has no wish to see his grandson,' muttered the steward; 'follow me, girl, and tread softly.'

"We descended the broad staircase, which was light as day in the cold winter moonlight. Andrew Burton cautiously opened the heavy door, and in another moment we stood ankle deep in the snow which covered the court-yard.

"A post-chaise and pair was waiting for us at the door. The steward lifted me into the vehicle, and five minutes afterwards we were driving at a fast pace through the park. The country was one sheet of snowy whiteness, and the wheels rolled noiselessly over the ground. No member of the sleeping household heard the sound of our midnight departure; no creature but the guilty marquis knew that a wicked deed was being done beneath the peaceful shelter of the night.

"We reached Paris early next morning, after travelling all night, and never once pausing on our way. I fed the infant, as well as I was able, from a bottle of new milk, which I procured at one of the places where we changed horses; but Dr. Servin's drug had done its work, for the child slept heavily all night.

"We stopped at a shabby hotel in one of the meanest quarters of Paris, not far from the cemetery of Père la Chaise, and, after giving me little better than an hour's rest, the steward announced to me that it was time to seek the nurse who was to take care of the hapless child.

"We left the hotel in a hired vehicle, and drove to a still more dreary quarter of the great city. We entered a narrow back street, and stopped at a shabby-looking house, six or seven stories high. The lower story was devoted to a wretched shop, in which a few faded-looking vegetables, which scarcely looked fit for human food, were exposed for sale.

"I recoiled with horror as I beheld the miserable aspect of the place.

"'The nurse does not live here, surely?' I exclaimed, as Andrew Burton told me to alight from the vehicle.

"'I suppose it isn't fine enough for your grand ideas, Mademoiselle Marie,' he said, scornfully; 'you women are never satisfied. Come, get down, my lady; remember that the master is a gentleman who likes to be obeyed. The nurse he has chosen *does* live here; but since you don't like the look of the place, you may leave the child in the gutter, if you prefer it. I don't suppose the marquis would have any objection to such an arrangement.'

"How could I remonstrate with this wretch? I descended from the carriage with the child in my arms, and followed Andrew Burton up the interminable flights of steps which led to the sixth story. Here, in a squalid and dirty apartment, I was introduced to the woman who was to nurse the child of a beautiful and high-born mother.

"The woman's countenance seemed kind and good-natured,—I was thank-

ful to Providence for this. Her own child had died, and she took the helpless little one to her breast with an air of tenderness which touched me to the heart.

"'Oh, be kind to him!' I exclaimed; 'Heaven will reward you if you are but kind to him, for never was a child so bitterly wronged as he has been.'

"Andrew Burton looked at me with a dark frown.

"'Have a care Mademoiselle Marie,' he muttered, in a threatening voice, 'or that long tongue of yours will get you into mischief some of these days.'

"He said this in English, but the woman could see by the expression of his face that he had spoken angrily.

"'Do not fear, mademoiselle,' she said; 'I will be all a mother could be to the helpless little one. My husband and I are very poor, and we are obliged to be content to live in a wretched place, but it is not in our natures to behave unkindly to a child.'

"Andrew Burton took out his pocket-book, and produced a bundle of bank-notes.

"'Here,' he said; 'this is more money than you ever had in your life before, I dare say. Take it; those who send you the child, send you this to pay you for your trouble; but remember, it is the last you will ever have. If the child dies a fortnight hence, the money will be yours to do what you like with. If he lives to be ninety, you will get no more. Nobody will ever claim the child from you. Nobody will ever question you as to your treatment of him. Treat him well or ill, starve him or feed him, it is all one to those who send him to you. The child is one too many in this world, and it matters nothing what becomes of him.'

"The woman looked with absolute terror at the speaker.

"'Thank Heaven that the child is now in my care,' she said; 'better that he should be in a hovel with me, than in a palace with you.'

"'Ah, you are fond of children, I suppose, madame,' the steward answered, carelessly; 'I'm not.'

"'Stay!' exclaimed the woman; '*what is the child's* name?'

"'He has no name,' the steward answered, harshly, — 'good-morning.'

"He left the room, but I lingered behind to kiss the unconscious child, and to speak a few words to the nurse.

"'Heaven will reward you for your goodness to this helpless infant,' I whispered. 'His mother is rich and aristocratic. She may one day claim him; she may one day repay you threefold for every kindness that you show her desolate child.'

"'I shall need no payment,' answered the woman; 'trust me, that I will not fail in my duty towards him.'

"'One word more,' I said; 'remember, whatever you do, that the child never parts with the miniature I have hidden amongst his clothes. His fate in after life may depend upon the preservation of that portrait.'

"I could say no more, for Andrew Burton called impatiently to me, telling me to follow him without another moment's delay.

"The woman pressed my hand as we parted.

"'Fear not,' she exclaimed, 'the little one shall be protected.

"In a few minutes I had descended the stairs, and was seated once more in the vehicle beside Andrew Burton.

"I had bade adieu to my mistress's child forever, I thought, but yet I was determined to make some effort to find him.

"I asked the steward the name of the street; but he refused to tell me.

"I looked in vain for some board at the corner, upon which the name of the street might be written; but I could see none.

"'Drive at your fastest speed,' cried Andrew Burton to the coachman, 'and you shall have double fare.'

"I knew that he gave this direction in order that I might have no opportunity of noticing the neighborhood."

CHAPTER LVI.

THE DAUGHTER'S FAREWELL.

MRS. BURTON continued the strange

story of her life, — that dark history of secret cruelty which so deeply involved the interests of the young millionnaire.

"Andrew Burton lost no time in hurrying me away from Paris. I quitted that city without carrying with me one clue by which I might be able to trace the son and heir of Colonel Hector Valancy at some future time. I knew not the name of the woman with whom the child had been left, nor that of the street in which she lived; for the steward's cold and caculating eyes had kept so close a watch upon me, that I had been unable to ask any questions of the coachman, who might, at least, have given me some information respecting the quarter in which the helpless infant had been left.

"We returned to the Chateau Duvernay, travelling all night, as upon the previous journey. I had only had two or three hours' rest in Paris, and was utterly worn out and exhausted when I reached the chateau. But I could not think of my physical sufferings; I thought only of the terrible scene which awaited me with the childless mother, whose infant had been so treacherously stolen from her arms.

"I was prepared once more to descend to the underground habitation in which, for months past, I had led such a monotonous life. I was resigned to this, and I was resigned also to endure the fury of the desolate mother, who would be only too likely to believe that I had been a willing instrument in the hands of the wretches who had robbed her of the last link which bound her to the joys of life.

"I was prepared to behold wild anger and ungovernable grief; but I was not prepared for the scene which I had to witness, — for the dark deed of vengeance of which I was by and by to become the instrument.

"I knew not Estella Duvernay. I knew not the nature of that proud and passionate girl, the scion of a haughty and powerful race, strong alike for good or evil.

"It was in the bleak winter's dawn that we arrived at the chateau. The building, magnificent though it was, looked dark and dreary in that chill morning light. The valet of the marquis admitted us.

"'Monsieur awaits you in his study,' he said to the steward; 'Mademoiselle Marie is also to accompany you. Monsieur begs that you will not stop to rest after your journey, but that you will go to him without a moment's delay; his business with you is important.'

"The man pronounced these words almost like an automaton. The marquis had rightly spoken when he said that his servants asked no questions. They were his slaves; for he paid them handsomely for their services and allowed them to live in luxury. But they knew his haughty nature too well to dare to question his actions. Had he been steeped to the lips in crime, they would have scarcely presumed to interfere; they would have shrunk from any betrayal of his secrets, so complete was his dominion over them.

"They could scarcely have failed to suspect that there was some mystery going forward within the walls of the chateau, but they made no remark. They may have whispered and wondered among themselves, but their manner to the marquis was the manner of serfs, in whom disobedience is death.

"The room which the valet had spoken of as the study was the chamber which communicated with the secret passage leading to the vault.

"The steward and I went without delay to this apartment, where a strange scene awaited us. The chill morning light streamed full into the chamber, for the heavy velvet curtains were flung back from the wide and lofty window, which almost occupied one entire side of the room; but wax candles still burned in the silver sconces upon the panelled walls, though they had burned low and a large pile of logs blazed upon the wide hearth.

"The Marquis Duvernay was standing with his back to the fire, and his elbow resting on the oaken mantelpiece. His face was pale and haggard, his dress disordered, and his appearance plainly announced that he had been sitting up throughout the previous night.

"Upon a sofa near the fire place, and upon her father's right hand, sat

Paulina Duvernay; while at the other end of the room, erect, haughty in her attitude, but pale as a corpse newly risen from the grave, stood the woman whom I had left sleeping an unnatural slumber in the vaulted chamber below the chateau.

"So perfect was the resemblance between the twin sisters, that I should have been unable to distinguish one from the other, but for the havoc which suffering had made in the face of the wretched Estella; while happiness and prosperity had left Paulina fresh and blooming in the first glow of youth.

"It was almost terrible to mark this difference between two faces which in every other respect were so exactly alike.

"The marquis turned his head towards us as we crossed the threshold of the room.

"'Good!' he exclaimed; 'I am glad that you have returned. You may go, Andrew,' he added, addressing the steward; 'it is with Mademoiselle Marie that I have to talk. Stay; all was arranged exactly according to my orders, I suppose?'

"'Yes, monsieur,' answered Andrew Burton, 'all.'

"'Enough, then; you may go.'

"The steward quitted the room, and I was left alone with the father and his two daughters, to one of whom he had been so bitter an enemy.

"'I have told madame that her child has been taken to a place of safety,' said the marquis, coldly, addressing himself to me, but keeping his eyes fixed upon his daughter Estella all the time he spoke; 'and I have told her also that she must never expect to look upon that child again.'

"I looked anxiously at the unhappy mother, but her face betrayed no sign of emotion; it was white and rigid as a marble mask.

"'But, monsieur,' I exclaimed, earnestly, 'have you also told Madame Valancy that I bore no willing part in the deed which robbed her of her child, and that, if I consented to assist in the business, I only did so because I knew but too well that, in the event of my refusal, you would find others willing to obey you, and because I wished to see with my own eyes that the child was placed where he would be kindly treated? Have you told madame this, monsieur?'

"The marquis shrugged his shoulders.

"'I did not consider it necessary to enter upon these small matters,' he said, scornfully; 'but since you appeal to me thus, Mademoiselle Marie, I am willing to bear witness that you have spoken the truth, and that you gave me a great deal of useless trouble, and talked an immense quantity of romantic nonsense, before you were wise enough to decide upon obeying me. People who disobey the Marquis Duvernay may sometimes have good reason to repent of their folly. You may learn that lesson from the example of the lady yonder.'

"He pointed as he spoke to Madame Valancy, with a scornful gesture of his jewelled hand.

"'O monsieur!' I exclaimed, indignant at his haughty insolence towards her whom he had so cruelly injured, 'for pity's sake do not speak thus heartlessly of your now unhappy daughter.'

"'My daughter!' he repeated, in a tone of surprise; 'what daughter? This lady is my only daughter. Estella Duvernay sleeps in the vault below the chapel sacred to our patron saint. My children never live to disgrace me.'

"'Monsieur,' I exclaimed, 'all this is a bitter mockery. Madame Valancy carries her birthright in her face, and no one in his right senses could for a moment deny that she is the twin sister of Mademoiselle Paulina.'

"'Go out into the world, then, and try to prove your mistress's identity. Try to prove against the oath of the Marquis Duvernay, against the oath of his *sole surviving daughter*, in the face of the evidence of the doctor, who is prepared to swear that he saw Estella Duvernay, and that of the servants who followed her coffin to its last resting-place. Bring forward your mistress, girl, tell the story of her wrongs, and try to prove that she is my daughter; and I, Joseph Antoine Michael Louis Lafarge Duvernay, will laugh at you and your folly in the open court; while

your mistress, the wretched adventuress whom you would try to set up in the place of the dead and buried daughter of this house, will be the laughing-stock of all Europe.'

"I shrank back stunned and appalled by so much wickedness. This man, this demon in human form, was prepared to deny the identity of his own child, and to draw upon her the ridicule of those to whom she might appeal for justice.

"Yet all this time Estella Duvernay had been silent; she uttered no word of remonstrance, no change in her face betrayed either indignation or anguish. Motionless as a statue she stood, as if face to face with her destiny, and prepared to endure the worst that fate could bring upon her.

"At first, as I gazed upon her, I thought that she feared her remorseless father; but upon looking more closely at that marble-like countenance, I saw a strange light in the eyes, and I began to understand my mistress better, — I began to understand that Estella Duvernay had the courage of a lioness.

"Presently she turned suddenly upon the father, and for the first time her face changed, her rigid lip slightly quivered, electric sparks of fury seemed to flash from her eyes.

"You mean to deny my identity, then?' she said, addressing the marquis.

"Most decidedly, madame,' he replied; 'if you are really so absurd as to declare yourself to be Estella Duvernay, I must of course deny your identity, as I repeat to you that my daughter Estella is dead. She died six months ago, and was buried in the family vault of the Duvernays.'

"'You still persist, then, in pretending to assert the reality of the sham death and burial of your wretched daughter? — you are prepared to hold by the evidence of the mock funeral which was performed at your direction, and with the assistance of your slavish and guilty instrument, Doctor Servin, and others as base and guilty as himself?'

"*I am prepared* to declare that *funeral to be no mockery*, but the actual *burial of my daughter.*'

"'And you will deny the legitimacy of my child?' asked the unhappy mother.

"'I deny nothing,' returned the marquis, with studied coldness; 'you are nothing to me; I know nothing of either you or your child; I have no wish to injure you, nor to interfere with you. Go where you please, do what you please, say what you please; I simply deny all knowledge of you. If you annoy me by declaring that you are my daughter, I shall of course institute criminal proceedings against you, in order that the law may teach you that it is sometimes necessary to hold your tongue.'

"'But if this girl bears witness of the truth of my statement?' cried my mistress, pointing to me; — 'if she is ready to swear that I am your daughter?'

"'In that case,' answered the marquis, carelessly, 'I must institute criminal proceedings against her also, and the law will teach her to hold her tongue. The law is a great instrument, madame, especially when it is employed in the defence of the rich.'

"It is impossible to describe the mocking bitterness with which the marquis uttered these words.

"'But enough,' he said, after a brief pause, — 'enough of this; you will see the folly of placing yourself in the position of an enemy to me and to my surviving daughter, Paulina, who inherits my determined nature. Let us have no more unpleasant speeches, madame. I say again, I wish to do you no injury; you are at perfect liberty to go forth into the world.'

"'To starve!' said Madame Valancy, bitterly.

"'Not so,' returned the marquis. 'At my bankers', in Paris, you will find a very large sum of money placed to your account. That sum will afford you a sufficient income to provide you with every comfort; but it will be useless to ask any questions respecting the person to whom you owe that gift, as it has been forwarded anonymously to the bankers. Your maid here can accompany you. You are free to go where you like, to do what you like, so long as you remember that, from the

moment of your leaving this house, all connection between us ceases at once and forever.'

"The daughter turned her face towards her father, — that rigid and marble-like face, in which the eyes alone appeared possessed of life. She looked at him for a few moments with a strange and almost awful gaze, and then turned to her sister, Mademoiselle Paulina, whose face was buried in her handkerchief.

"'Paulina Duvernay,' said my mistress, quietly, 'you have heard that man, the Marquis Duvernay; you have heard him speak. Are your sentiments the same as his?'

"Paulina lifted her face. I could see that she had been weeping. She did not return her sister's steadfast gaze, but averted her face as she spoke.

"'My sentiments are the same as my father's, in wishing to avoid the consequences of the shame that has fallen upon our household,' she said, in a low, tremulous voice. 'I love; and the man I love would not brook disgrace. He would sacrifice his affection to his honor.'

"'And you see me before you, your sister, — yes, your twin sister, — you see me robbed of husband and of son, of home and kindred, ay, even of a name, and sent forth into the world, alone and comfortless, with the poisonous venom of mingled despair and vengeance brooding in my heart, and you do not say to me, "Estella, my sister, I at least will be your friend; I at least will lift up my voice against the father who has wronged you." And now I ask you, Paulina, if *you* will suffer me to go forth.'

"Paulina bent her head beneath the flashing glance of her sister, but she did not speak.

"'Your silence answers me,' murmured Estella, in a low, determined voice.

"Madame de Valancy crossed the room slowly and deliberately. She approached her sister, who sat in a crouching attitude close to the wide hearth. Estella laid her hands lightly upon the shoulders of the shrinking Paulina.

"'Look at me!' she cried; 'do not hide your face. Let me look straight into your eyes.'

"In spite of herself, Paulina obeyed that imperious command.

"She looked up, and the eyes of the two sisters met.

"'We have been called alike,' said Estella, in slow and solemn tones, — 'so much alike, that the face of one was as the reflection of the face of the other. But that is past now. Sorrow and anguish, care and misery, have written deep lines in *my* face which I cannot see in *yours*, my proud and prosperous sister. Now mark me: I say to you that the day will come, — as surely as I stand here, looking into your false and cruel face, — when *your* mirror shall reflect the same lines, and you shall say, "I am like my sister in the hour of her anguish." The cup which I have drunk, *you*, too, shall drain to the lowest dregs. A treasure like to that which has been lost by me shall be lost by you, and you, like me, shall go childless and desolate to your grave. This is my farewell to you, Paulina Duvernay. In the hour of your deepest bliss, remember these words; in the hour of your wildest happiness, remember that I, the sister whom you have cast from you, am waiting, — waiting patiently, — waiting silently, — but watching always for — REVENGE!'

"I cannot describe the awful sound of these words. I have never forgotten them. They have haunted me in my madness, and perhaps the memory of them has helped to make me mad. They will haunt me till I die.

"Paulina Duvernay crouched white and trembling before her sister, as if stricken to the earth by those denouncing words.

"Madame Valancy turned to her father.

"'I am ready to go, Marquis Duvernay,' she said; 'but I would give you one word of warning ere I leave this room. Think twice before you send me from you in my present humor. Think twice.'

"The Duvernays are not in the habit of reconsidering any decision at which they arrive,' the marquis answered,

coldly. 'I have only to wish you good-morning. You will find a post-chaise in the court-yard of the chateau, which will convey you upon any road you choose to take. The world is all before you, madame.'

"The marquis flung himself carelessly into an easy-chair near the fire, and took up a newspaper. Nothing could exceed the cool insolence of this action, yet I could see that his lip quivered, and that the newspaper shook in his trembling hand.

"My mistress moved towards the door. She had wrapped herself in a voluminous velvet mantle, the hood of which covered her dark hair.

"'Come, Marie,' she said, as she passed me.

"I followed her down the broad oaken staircase. I felt that henceforth my fate was interwoven with hers. I felt myself utterly weak and helpless beneath that imperious will.

"We left the chateau, that stately pile which I was never again to behold.

"'To Paris,' my mistress said to the postilion, and once more I was a traveller upon that long and dreary road.

"There is no need for me to dwell upon the history of our life in Paris. Madame Valancy took up her abode in one of the poorest quarters of the city. We lived the existence of the poorest, for I was ready to submit to anything in obedience to my mistress. Madame Valancy visited the banker's every month, and received the interest of the money that had been deposited there for her by her heartless father. But of that money she spent only as much as was requisite for the mere necessaries of life. The rest was hoarded, — hoarded as jealously as the miser hoards his treasured wealth, — but hoarded against the day of vengeance.

"Estella Valancy did not attempt to assert her identity. She knew her father well enough to know that any open effort against him would be useless. She waited, and waited patiently, for the hour of retribution.

"'Bear with me patiently, my poor Marie,' she would say sometimes, for to me she was ever gentle and kind, — a friend, a sister, rather than a mistress; 'I know that this is a hard life for you, but when the day for which I live is past, you shall be rich. I shall not long outlive that day, and I will leave you all the money of which I may die possessed.'

"She always said this with an air of certainty, as if she had had a prophetic knowledge of her fate.

"A year passed thus. The marquis had told his daughter that Hector Valancy was dead, but I had never revealed to my mistress the terrible secret which I had discovered in the vaults of the chateau, — the death and midnight burial of her soldier husband.

"She had made inquiries respecting his fate immediately upon her arrival in Paris, and she had been told that Colonel Hector Valancy had *disappeared* immediately after his return from Algiers. She had demanded whether no steps were to be taken to discover his fate, and she had been told that the Government was perfectly *satisfied*.

"The influence of the Marquis Duvernay had been powerful enough to prevent any unpleasant inquiries.

"Nothing occurred during the whole of that long and weary year. I knew not how the time had passed for my mistress, for she never spoke of her own troubles, but it had been terribly heavy upon my hands. Madame Valancy and I had tried day after day, and week after week, to discover the abode in which the child had been left, but without success.

"At last an event occurred which changed the tenor of our lives. Paulina's marriage took place at the Madeleina, the most fashionable church in Paris, and once more Estella looked upon her sister; but the bride knew not of the fierce eyes which watched her from the shadow of a pillar. Proud, happy, and beautiful, she gave her hand to the husband of her choice, surrounded by a crowd of the most elegant and aristocratic in Paris.

"From that hour, Madame Valancy and I followed the bride and bridegroom wherever they went. We dogged their footsteps upon the bridal tour, in which love, youth, wealth, all combined to render them happy. The heavens smiled upon them; but in all the sunshine Estella Valancy followed

like a dark shadow, a threatening storm-cloud, forever lowering in the horizon.

CHAPTER LVII.

ESTELLA'S REVENGE.

"A YEAR had passed since the marriage of Paulina Duvernay, and Sir Harvey Oswald, when my mistress and I arrived at a small village, in the south of France, called Losvigny.

"The baronet and his wife had arrived before us. They were staying at the principal hotel. We, therefore, took up our abode at a small and humble inn, kept by a deaf old woman, and only frequented by the poorest class of travellers.

"I have told you how closely we followed upon the track of the baronet and his young wife, and you will wonder, perhaps, how it was that we had escaped detection. I will explain this in a few words. Before leaving Paris, Madame Valancy had provided herself with several complete disguises both for herself and me; and so perfect were these disguises, that it was almost impossible for any one to have recognized either of us.

"The costume which my mistress wore when we reached Losvigny was that of an elderly widow in humble circstances. Her face was sallow and wrinkled, her hair white, her beautiful and most unnaturally brilliant eyes hidden by hideous green spectacles. Her dress was threadbare and shabby, as if from long wear, and she had altogether the appearance of some poverty-stricken and faded member of the middle classes, too proud and too respectable to confess her poverty.

"I was disguised as her servant, a woman of the same age. My clothes were of the humblest and commonest materials, and, like those of my mistress, very much the worse for wear.

"Madame Valancy knew the world well enough to know that it is easy for the poor to escape observation, but that the movements of the wealthy are always closely watched and untiringly talked about by their neighbors.

"Those who saw us at our humble inn — shabbily dressed, downcast, unpretentious — never cared to ask any questions about us. They little knew the hoard of gold which my mistress had accumulated during the two years which had elapsed since our departure from the Chateau Duvernay.

"For a whole twelvemonth we had tracked the footsteps of Sir Harvey and Lady Oswald; but during the whole of that time I had never been able to fathom my mistress's motive for thus following the newly-married couple.

"I dared not attempt to question her, for at the faintest mention of their names, a terrible light would flame up in her large dark eyes, — such a wild glare as might flash from the eyeballs of a lioness who had been robbed of her young.

"I felt instinctively that there could be but *one* motive for this slow and determined pursuit, and I knew that motive could be no other than revenge.

"Yet I wondered why it was that my mistress had waited so long. For what did she wait?

"I was only too soon to learn this.

"Lady Oswald was the happy mother of a lovely infant, — a girl, — who had been born two months before our arrival at Losvigny.

"It was early in June, and the sunny South seemed one bright fairy-land of flowers, canopied over by a sky blue as the forget-me-nots which gemmed the dewy grass.

"For the happy and the innocent Losvigny and its neighborhood formed a paradise, and it seemed as if the baronet and his young wife fully enjoyed its rustic delights.

"It seemed as if Paulina Duvernay had entirely forgotten her sister, — that ill-used sister, whose cruel fate she had made no effort to avert.

"We often met the young couple in their woodland wanderings, — sometimes riding, sometimes walking, sometimes driving, but almost always accompanied by the child in the arms of its nurse, who was an English woman.

"We saw enough and heard enough

to know that Sir Harvey and Lady Oswald were happy — unutterably happy — in the possession of this cherished little one.

"I know not why, but a chill and terrible feeling used to come over me as my mistress and I passed the happy couple. The dark shadows of her mourning garments seemed to fall heavily upon that joyous group. There was a painful contrast in the circumstances of the two sisters. One honored, beloved, happy; the other robbed of all that makes life dear, — friendless, loveless, ay, even nameless.

"Was it strange that the dreadful feeling of revenge should have usurped the place of every softer emotion in the breast of the unhappy Estella?

"One day, after we had been at Losvigny for nearly a month, we, for the first time, met the nurse and child alone.

"It was only seven o'clock in the morning, and she had wandered out before breakfast. She was a pale-faced, slender girl, with a timid expression, and looked as if she had known trouble. She was resting upon a rough wooden bench in an avenue outside the village, when my mistress and I approached.

"We seated ourselves upon the rustic bench, but the nurse rose as if wishing to retire, out of a sentiment of respect for my mistress, who looked a perfect lady in spite of her shabby dress.

"'Stop, my good girl,' said Madame Valancy; 'pray do not leave this spot because of our coming. It will be great pleasure to me to look at the baby, if you will allow me to do so.'

"The nurse smiled, evidently reassured by the kindness of my mistress's manner. She removed a costly lace veil which had shrouded the face of the infant, and Estella Valancy gazed long and earnestly on the serene countenance of the sleeping little one.

"I could guess the dark thoughts that were busy in the mind of the outraged and forlorn mother as she watched the lovely face of that baby sleeper.

"A black frown contracted her brow, and the nervous motion of her quivering lip told the intensity of her feeling.

"Doubtless she was thinking, 'My child might have been as beautiful as this one; my child might have made me as happy as these proud parents are in the possession of this one.'

"For some time my mistress sat perfectly silent, watching the child; then, suddenly raising her eyes to the face of the nurse, she examined her countenance with even a more earnest scrutiny than she had bestowed upon that of the infant.

"'You seem attached to this child?' she said, at length.

"'I am, madame,' the nurse answered, with an air of perfect candor.

"'And to the child's parents also, I suppose?'

"The girl hesitated for some moments, and a faint blush tinged her pale face.

"'Come,' said Madame Valancy, 'you may answer me with perfect frankness, my poor child. I do not know your master and mistress, and I have no interest in asking you this question beyond the interest which I take in your unprotected situation.'

"The girl semed reassured by these words.

"'You are very good, madame,' she said, in French; with which she seemed perfectly acquainted, though she was, as I have said, an English woman. 'I have nothing to complain of in my present situation, and yet —'

"'And yet, what?' asked Madame Valancy, as the girl hesitated.

"'My mistress, Lady Oswald, is proud, very proud. My master also is silent and reserved, and very haughty in his manner of addressing me. I should not feel this, but I am obliged to be much with them in my attendance upon the child, and I sometimes feel humiliated by the aristocratic insolence of their manner.'

"'Naturally enough,' answered Madame Valancy; 'and this makes you unhappy?'

"'No, madame,' replied the girl; 'it is not this that makes me unhappy.'

"'What then, my poor child?'

"'I am engaged to be married to a tradesman in England, a young man who was foolish enough to begin business without sufficient money. He is

now in prison for debt, and I cannot feel otherwise than unhappy when I remember how much he must suffer, for he is good and honest, and I know that he bitterly feels the shame of his position.'

"My mistress was silent for a few moments, as if absorbed in reflection.

"'This is very sad, my poor girl,' she said at length, 'and I no longer wonder that you seem unhappy. But will not your master and mistress advance you the money requisite to pay your lover's debt, and release him from prison?'

"'Oh, no, madame,' answered the girl, 'how could I ask them such a favor! What claim have I upon them? What right have I to demand such a boon? Sir Harvey Oswald pays me very good wages, and I try to save all I can; but the sum for which my poor George is detained in prison is a very large one, — upwards of two hundred pounds. It will be many years before I shall be able to save the money.'

"A strange and lurid light illumined the face of my mistress as she listened to these words.

"'It will take you many years to save the money,' she said, 'and during all those years your lover must remain in prison, despised and abandoned by all who were once his friends.'

"'Yes, madame, it is indeed so,' the girl answered, with tears in her eyes.

"I thought my mistress was unnecessarily cruel to this friendless girl.

"I little knew the motive hidden beneath her apparently idle words.

"'What would you do to procure the sum necessary for the release of your lover?' Madam Valancy asked presently.

"'What would I do, madame?' repeated the girl, with enthusiasm; 'what is there I would shrink from doing, to set my poor George at liberty? But who would give me so much money?' she added, despondently.

"'I would give it you,' answered Madame Valancy, 'upon one condition.'

"'You, madame!' cried the nurse; 'impossible.'

"I saw that the girl glanced almost involuntarily at my mistress's shabby dress. Madame Valancy also saw and understood that expressive glance.

"'You think, because I do not wear silks and satins, laces and feathers, like your proud mistress, that I am poor,' said my mistress; 'but you are mistaken, my child. Different people value money for different uses. I am old, and care nothing for dress. It suits me to be thought poor, because it suits me to be unnoticed. But I am rich enough to gratify any caprice, however apparently foolish. I say again, I will give you the money which will enable you to release your lover from prison, upon one condition.'

"'Oh, madame, speak,' cried the girl; 'what is the condition? Do not hesitate to demand what you will of me. No sacrifice can be too great if it enables me to restore my poor George to happiness and prosperity.'

"'The sacrifice which I have to demand of you is one that will not in any manner affect yourself,' answered Estella Valancy; 'but there is no time now to talk further of the subject. Come to me after dark this evening, at the Golden Lion in the village. You know the place, no doubt; and I will tell you the conditions upon which I shall be willing to give you the money you require. It will be for you to reject them or to accept them, as you may think fit.'

"'Ah, madame, there is little fear that I shall reject them,' the girl answered, hopefully. 'After dark then, madame, I will be with you.'

"'Yes, say at half-past nine. Can you leave the infant at that time?'

"'Yes, madame. I have a French nurse under me, who watches the child whenever I am absent. And at that time in the evening the infant is most likely to be asleep. You may depend upon my being punctual, madame.'

"'Very good; then I will wish you good-morning.'

"Madame Valancy rose and left the bench. I of course followed her, and we walked slowly homewards.

"I saw a look in my mistress's face that day which I never remembered having seen before, — a look of un-

mingled triumph, as if the long years of patient waiting had ended, and the day of vengeance had at last arrived.

"During the whole of that long summer day my mistress sat alone in her own apartment, moody and silent. The birds sang loud and joyously in the woods about Losvigny; the air was heavy with the perfume of a thousand blossoms; but throughout the long, sunny hours, Estella Valancy remained a willing prisoner in her dark and dreary chamber at the Golden Lion.

"Once, and once only, did she address me during the day, and then, to my surprise, she gave me orders which I had not thought to receive so long as Sir Harvey and Lady Oswald remained at Losvigny.

"'I expect to leave this place shortly, and I may leave suddenly, Marie,' she said; 'so you can occupy yourself in making all preparations for our departure.'

"I willingly obeyed my mistress's orders, for I was only too glad to be employed in any manner. It was, at least, better than to sit watching Madame Valancy, as hour after hour she sat silent, unoccupied, and statue-like, by the open window of her chamber.

"I employed nearly the whole of the day in packing our things, and had only completed my preparations at dusk.

"Then for the second time my mistress spoke to me.

"'You must be tired, Marie,' she said; 'you had better eat your supper and go to bed. You may be obliged to rise early to-morrow morning.'

"I understood the meaning of this. We had only two apartments. The bed-chamber opened out of the sitting-room. I slept in a small bed in this apartment. I guessed my mistress's motive for dismissing me thus early. She wished, no doubt, to receive the young nurse alone.

"I went to rest with a heavy heart, for I felt that some hidden evil was hovering over Lady Oswald and her husband. But I could not refuse to obey. The power which Madame Valancy possessed over me was boundless. It was the power which a strong nature must always have over a weak one.

"I obeyed, therefore, and went to bed. The clocks of Losvigny were striking nine as I lay down upon my pillow.

"I was tired out by my day's work, and fell into a profound and heavy slumber.

"From this slumber I was awakened suddenly by my mistress's voice. I opened my eyes, and found Madame Valancy standing at my bedside, dressed and with a candle in her hand.

"'Get up, Marie,' she said, in a low but determined voice, 'and dress yourself as quickly as possible. I told you that we should leave Losvigny soon, and perhaps suddenly. We leave in a quarter of an hour.'

"Confused and bewildered by being so abruptly awakened, I hurried on my clothes, while my mistress paced up and down the room as if possessed by some restless demon, who would not suffer her to be still.

"'It is the middle of the night,—is it not, madame?' I said.

"'No,' answered Madame Valancy, 'it wants only an hour of dawn. When the sun rises, we shall be far away from Losvigny. Far away,' added my mistress, with a strange and almost ferocious expression, and with her flashing dark eyes fixed upon vacancy,—'far away, my Lady Oswald, proud wife and happy mother! When the sun rises, awake, awake, desolate one! for my hour of vengeance will have come!'

"I could not understand the meaning of these strange words: I began to think that anguish and despair had at last done their fatal work, and that my mistress was mad.

"We descended to the door of the inn, where a roomy carriage and four horses awaited us. We had never before travelled in this expensive manner, and I wondered at Madame Valancy's sudden recklessness of her hoarded gold.

"I took my place in the vehicle, and my mistress seated herself at my side.

"'You have received your directions,' she said to the postilion; 'you know what to do.'

"'Yes, madame.'

"We drove off, but only at a foot pace, and at about a hundred yards from the inn, we stopped at a turn in the road, and the postilion gave a long, low whistle.

"He dismounted, and opened the door of the carriage. Then, for the first time, I saw through the gloom the figure of a woman standing in the roadway,— a woman who carried some burden in her arms.

"She took her seat opposite to me in the carriage. I recognized her then. She was Lady Oswald's nurse, and the burden which she carried was the idolized child of the baronet and his wife.

"I understood all now. *My mistress, Estella Valancy, had stolen her sister's child.*

"This was the revenge for which she had waited and watched so long.

"I could not conceal my horror of this terrible vengeance.

"'O madame, madame!' I exclaimed, entreatingly, 'dear mistress, do not commit this crime!'

"Madame Valancy seized my arm in her slender hand. Her convulsive grasp was strong as iron.

"'Silence, girl!' she said, in a hissing whisper. 'This is the vengeance for which I have waited, and *you* know that it is my due. Now, postilion,' she cried, addressing the man to whom she had spoken before, 'lose not a moment; and remember that you will be nobly paid for discretion and celerity.'

"The carriage dashed off, the four horses tearing along at a mad gallop. We flew past the house in which the unconscious mother slept, happy and fearless.

"I could have pitied her, but I remembered that cruel scene in the vaults of the Chateau Duvernay; and I felt that Estella Valancy's vengeance was fully deserved.

"'This proud sister trampled upon a mother's broken heart, in her stubborn pride,' I thought; 'she is now a mother, and she will know now what it is to suffer a mother's anguish.'

"It is needless to dwell upon this journey. We hurried on, never resting until we reached Havre, whence we were to cross to Southampton. I could see that Martha Price, the nurse, was unhappy in the thought of the sin she had committed; but, on the other hand, she had won the highest desire of her life, — she had in her possession the money that was to set her lover at liberty.

"We reached England. My mistress dismissed the nurse immediately after her arrival at Southampton, and I took care of the child. The helpless little one pined sadly among strangers; but it was a healthy child, and it bore trials which might have killed a sickly infant.

"We left Southampton almost immediately after parting with Martha Price; but, instead of going to London, we proceeded in a post-chaise to a small inland town.

"'Those who seek for the child will be likely to seek in London,' my mistress said. 'We will outwit them, Mary, and it will be strange if they find the infant where I shall hide it.'

"There was a fair being held at the little town where we stopped, and the place was filled with gipsies and tramps.

"This suited my mistress well, for the poor abandoned child would doubtless be considered the offspring of one of these nameless wanderers.

"I need not dwell long upon the rest of my story. If I am right, and if the girl whom I saw in this room is indeed the daughter of Paulina Oswald, you will know almost as much as I can tell you."

"I do," exclaimed Percival Holmwood; "the child was left upon the steps of a van belonging to a man called Primmins."

"She was," answered Mrs. Burton. "I myself left her there, poor, hapless infant! but pinned in the bosom of her frock there was a paper upon which Madame Valancy had written only two words."

"And those words were?"

"'ESTELLA'S REVENGE.'"

"Strange!" exclaimed the young millionnaire. "I never heard of this. But tell me, for pity's sake, when this vengeance was accomplished? What became of my unhappy mother?"

"From that time she pined and faded," answered Mrs. Burton. She was no longer the proud and imperious mistress beneath the strength of whose unbending will I was utterly powerless. She now became feeble, gentle, and submissive as a child. I conveyed her to London, for she consented to any step which I proposed, and called in the most skilful physicians that I could procure; but they could do nothing for her, — all vitality seemed gone. Her vengeance was accomplished, and, childless and lonely, she had no wish but to die."

"My poor mother! my poor injured mother!" murmured Percival.

"At last the appointed day came. She had been sinking gradually for some time, and she expired in my arms, almost as calmly as a child who sinks to sleep."

There was a pause, during which Percival Holmwood sat silent and melancholy. Amid all this wretched story there was but one gleam of joy. He was no longer nameless. He was the lawful son of a brave and honorable man.

"You will ask me, perhaps, why I married Andrew Burton, the wretch whom I hated as the base and mercenary instrument of the wicked marquis. I can only tell you that I yielded to an unworthy feeling of fear. The steward found me out within a few weeks of my poor mistress's death. He pretended to know my story, and threatened me with the most dire vengeance if I refused to become his wife.

"I consented therefore, for my brain was weakened by the strange scenes through which I had passed. Life was utterly indifferent to me, and I was powerless to resist the will of a bad and obstinate man.

"He could have had but one motive in marrying me; and that motive was, of course, to get possession of the money which he had discovered had been left me by my mistress.

"I have little to say about my after life. I can only tell you that it was a very miserable one. I have been mad for years, tortured by remorse for the tacit share which I had taken in so many crimes; and it is only now, on the threshold of the grave, that I at last recover the light of reason."

Thus ended the strange story told by Mrs. Burton. The secrets of the past were revealed, — secrets which so materially concerned Percival Holmwood and Aurora.

"Answer me one question," exclaimed the young millionnaire. "This Paulina Duvernay, or rather Lady Oswald, does she still live?"

"She does," answered the sick woman; "or she did live some months since, when I heard her name mentioned. She lives in Italy. She has resided abroad ever since the death of her husband, who died suddenly soon after the disappearance of the child."

"Her life has been a desolate one, then?"

"Very desolate," returned Mrs. Burton. "Heaven is sometimes slow to avenge wrong, but, however long the day of retribution may linger, it comes surely at last, — it comes at last."

Little more was said that day. Percival Holmwood left Mrs. Burton after saying a few friendly words to the sick woman. He was almost too bewildered for serious reflection upon what he had heard. He had only one clear idea amidst his distraction.

"I must tell Aurora," he thought; "it is right that she should know this without delay."

He hurried to the neat little shop at Walham Green. Mr. Primmins was busy behind the counter, arranging his wares to the best advantage, and contemplating his display of merchandise with considerable pride.

"I must speak with you alone, John," the young millionnaire said, earnestly.

Mr. Primmins stared, but led the way into the little back parlor, and closed the door behind him.

"Aurora is upstairs, — is she not?" asked Percival.

"She is, bless her tender heart! along of poor Mrs. Maldon and the

babby; and if ever there was a deserted wife in this wide world, Mrs. Maldon is that individual. I only wish *I'd* got the sarving out of her precious husband, that's all; I'd pound him!"

"Never mind that now, my good friend; I want to talk to you seriously and earnestly. You have been a good and kind protector to your adopted child, but you have not fully done your duty to her."

Mr. John Primmins' countenance lengthened terribly as Percival Holmwood said this.

"Not done my duty to her, Mr. Holmwood!" he cried, piteously; "now don't you go to say that. As if there was ever anything I couldn't have done for that there precious darling! Why, I've worshipped my pet as if she'd been an angel dropped from the skies, wings and all; and if she could have eat gold she should have had it to eat."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Percival, "I know that, John. The most indulgent father could not have done more than you have done; but your solemn duty was to have tried to discover the parents of the child you had adopted."

"What! and give her up to 'em, Mr. Holmwood?" cried the Cheap Jack; "not if I knowed it."

"That's where you have done wrong, John," said Percival, gravely. "You were bound to consider the child's interests before your own affection. You did more than this; you kept secret the only clue which might have led to the discovery of the parents."

Mr. John Primmins turned very pale. He had indeed, as we know, studiously kept the secret of the paper which he had found sewn to the clothes of the infant.

"I've been a villain," he cried suddenly. "Lord a' mercy on me, but I thought I was a-doing for the best. My darlin' was happy with me, and I was happy with my darlin,' and how could I go for to give her up? How could I go for to do it, when she was all the world to me, bless her pretty face?"

. . . . .

That night Aurora learned that she was not the sister of Percival Holmwood. The tie that united them was a close one, but they were only first cousins.

If she loved him, that love, however weak, however foolish, was at least not a mortal sin.

Then for the first time she knew that she loved him, — loved him truly, tenderly, devotedly, hopelessly perhaps; who knows?

At the earliest opportunity, an advertisement was inserted in the *Times* newspaper: —

"If Lady Oswald, or any one interested in that lady's happiness, will send her address to P. H., in the care of Messrs. Mawson and Grinder, Lincoln's Inn Fields, a secret may be revealed, which has been hidden for twenty years."

After a lapse of a very brief period, a foreign letter was received from Lady Oswald. The postmark was Turin.

The letter was worded thus: —

"SIR, — There can be but one secret which can in any way concern my happiness, and that is the secret of the fate of that idolized child who was stolen from me at the village of Losvigny, twenty years ago.

"I have reason to believe that your advertisement can only relate to that secret, and when this letter reaches you, I shall be on my way to England.

"Yours obediently,
"PAULINA OSWALD."

Three weeks after this, Aurora, the friendless, nameless girl, was clasped in her mother's arms.

There was little need of legal evidence to prove her identity. Heaven had stamped her parentage upon her lovely face, which seemed a younger reflection of Paulina Oswald's.

Meanwhile Percival Holmwood was away in Paris, seeking out any surviving members of the Valancy family.

Money is powerful enough to effect almost a miracle; Percival, therefore, had no fear that he should fail in proving his identity.

CHAPTER LVIII.

ISADORA MONKTON REVEALS HERSELF.

LET us return to the scene of that

lonely cottage upon the water bank, in which the Duke of Arlington beheld the scene which fully revealed to him the guilt of his beautiful wife.

The masked stranger, the man who, on removing his mask, had revealed the ghastly and death-like features of the murdered artist, Hubert Monkton, snatched the two torches from the table, flung them upon the ground, and trampled upon them.

The lower chamber was thus left in complete darkness.

The duke turned towards the White Phantom, the shadowy form which still remained in the gloomiest corner of the upper chamber.

"Are you convinced now?" said the voice; "do you believe now that I told you the truth upon the eve of your wedding-day, when I declared to you that Blanche Vavasour was a murderess?"

"Yes," answered the duke, in a hoarse voice, and with the strange, unnatural manner of a man who speaks in his sleep. "Yes, I believe all now. But why — why have you juggled with me thus? Why have you kept your name and your dwelling secret from me?"

"I kept myself secret because, if I had revealed my name, you would have refused to believe me, Gerald Mortimer, — you would have laughed at me, perhaps. It may be that you would have set the mighty engines of the law in motion, and I being obscure and poor, you rich and powerful, the law would have compelled me to be silent. I was determined to keep my secret, therefore, until the hour in which you should say to me, 'I am convinced!' That hour has come, and there is now no longer need of secrecy. Uncover your face, Sebastian Contes, and light the lamp."

Sebastian Contes — for it was indeed the young Spanish sculptor, who had acted as the Duke of Arlington's mysterious guide to the lonely cottage, — lighted a lamp which vividly illuminated the chamber.

It revealed an apartment almost as empty and desolate as the room below. The only articles of furniture were three rush-bottomed chairs and a rough deal table.

Sebastian Contes placed the small portable lamp, which he had carried in the pocket of his great-coat, upon this table, and then pointed to one of the chairs.

The duke sank into it with a groan.

The honest, the generous, and manly heart of Gerald Mortimer was well-nigh broken. He had met with the basest treachery from the woman he had trusted so long, so fully.

The blow was indeed a terrible one.

Then, for the first time, the Duke of Arlington distinctly beheld the denouncer who had followed upon his wife's track from the hour of Hubert Monkton's disappearance.

By that brilliant lamplight he saw a shrouded figure, slender and delicate, but veiled from head to foot in gaudy white draperies, which gave a shadowy and phantom-like appearance to the form.

"Who are you?" cried Gerald Mortimer, — "who are you?"

"I am a woman," answered the voice, which had struck despair to the nobleman's proud heart when it had revealed the baseness of his idolized wife, — "I am a woman, and a revengeful one."

Two small hands flung back the white and cloud-like draperies, and the pale face of Isadora Monkton was revealed to the duke.

It was she, and she alone, who had followed upon the track of the cold-blooded murderess of Hubert Monkton.

It was she, and she alone, who had plotted the fatal discovery which had taken place this night.

"I am a woman, and a revengeful woman," she continued, her voice sounding almost unearthly in its unnatural and melancholy earnestness. "I come of an old Spanish family, for I have the blood of a Spanish mother in my veins. I come of a proud and passionate race, — a race whose souls are like untempered iron, that can break, but will never bend. Where we love, we love forever! Where we hate, we hate forever! With us, love and hate are akin to madness, perhaps.

But we never change. I loved my cousin, Hubert Monkton, — loved him as only the women of my race can love, — loved him better than my life, — better, it may be, than my soul. Ay, and the day was when he returned my affection, when he loved me truly and dearly, and the fair future smiled before me, a bright and sunny prospect of happiness and delight."

"Poor girl! poor girl!" murmured the duke.

The dream of the strong man's loving heart had just been shattered, and he could feel for a woe which was like his own.

"I was happy, Heaven knows how happy," continued the impassionate Spanish girl, "till the evil day came, the black day for him and for me, — the day whose coming sealed the fate of both.

"I say that Hubert Monkton loved me. He did love me, until Lady Blanche Vavasour crossed his pathway. From that hour he changed. He was bewitched, intoxicated by the studied fascinations of the false enchantress. The fashionable beauty, the unscrupulous and callous-hearted woman of the world, who, beneath the outward semblance of an angel, concealed the soul of a fiend, was pleased with her conquest. She fooled the young artist too. Perhaps, as much as she could love, she loved him. It pleased her to see him cast his heart, his ambition, his future, all beneath her feet, that she might trample upon them. This pleased her. He was young, handsome, generous, enthusiastic. He was no paltry prize; but he could not give her that which her ambitious nature desired, the strawberry coronet of a duchess, the unbounded wealth of a queen. *You* could give her these things, and in order to obtain them she sacrificed the young and ardent lover, she swept him from her path as remorselessly as she would have swept aside a worm. She had written him letters, — letters in which she avowed her lasting, her eternal affection, and she knew your proud nature, Gerald Mortimer. She knew that if those letters had fallen into your hands, you would have cast her from you, as a base and unworthy creature, a traitor alike to love and honor. Hubert Monkton refused to return those letters. He did not choose that another man should be fooled as he had been fooled. He threatened to place them in your hands. From that hour his doom was sealed; and six hours after he had declared his resolution, he was decoyed from the house and murdered, — murdered by some base tool, employed by your wife, Blanche Mortimer!"

"O misery! misery!" exclaimed the Duke of Arlington. He could no longer refuse to believe in his shame and despair. From the lips of his wife herself he had heard an admission of her guilt.

"But tell me," he cried, "what was the meaning of that strange scene which took place below not half an hour since? What was the reason of the terror of — of her whom I may no longer call my wife, when the man whom she called Percival Holmwood removed his mask?"

"Blanche Mortimer had good reason for her terror," answered Isadora, coldly; "she believed that she was looking upon the face of the dead."

"And the terror of the man who was with her?"

"He also thought that he beheld the dead — the murdered dead. That man was no other than a footman — a lackey — employed in the service of the duchess, and one of the base tools who perpetrated the murder."

"A footman in the service of the duchess?"

"Yes; your Grace must have often encountered the man. His name is Philip Howland."

"O merciful Heaven!" exclaimed the duke; "this is too horrible."

"But this is not all," continued Isadora Monkton, in a cold and pitiless voice. "The other tool — indeed, the actual perpetrator of the murder — is an Indian — a Thug — one of those wretches whose very religion is bloodshed. He also is a dweller in your house. He continues to pass as an Italian, and calls himself Giovanni Baptista. He acts as courier to the duchess."

The duke covered his face with his hands. He was stunned, stupefied by that which he had heard. He asked no further questions; he sought to know no more. He did not even attempt to penetrate that strange mystery by which the dead had been made to appear to the living.

He rose from his seat, and walked across the moor, — at first staggering like a drunken man, but afterwards steadying himself by an effort.

He pointed to the trap-door, and spoke in a strange and husky voice to the young Spaniard, Sebastian Contes, who was watching him with a glance of pity.

"If you will conduct me back to the spot at which my horse was left, I shall be obliged to you," he said.

Sebastian bowed assent, and raised the trap-door.

Before descending, the duke turned once more to Isadora.

"You have done me a service," he said, in the same husky voice. "I have been blind until to-night, but you have torn away the bandage that obscured my mental vision. I cannot thank you yet — I suffer too much; but the day may come in which I shall be able to express my gratitude."

"You owe me no thanks," answered Isadora. "I swore to be revenged upon the murderess of the man I loved, and I have kept my oath. Life holds no further purpose for me, and I can but pray for death as a welcome release from a dark and joyless existence. If the dream of your life is broken, the dream of mine was shattered long ago, upon the night on which Hubert Monkton fell beneath the relentless hand of his murderer."

No other word was spoken. The duke descended, and left the dreary and tenantless dwelling. He mounted his horse, and rode slowly away, after bidding Sebastian Contes a hasty farewell.

Thus ended the dream of Gerald Mortimer's life. Thus forever perished his faith in the woman he had loved so tenderly.

CHAPTER LIX.

IN THE DRESSING-ROOM OF THE DUCHESS.

The cold gray dawn was glimmering upon the tree-tops in Cavendish Square when the Duchess of Arlington returned from the masquerade at Twickenham.

She ascended the broad stone staircase of that stately mansion of which she was the beautiful mistress, and passed through a suite of chambers leading to her dressing-room.

These exquisitely furnished apartments were not divided from each other by ordinary doors, but by lofty archways, shrouded by voluminous curtains of the costliest white velvet, bordered with golden fringes.

The panels of the walls were also of white and gold, adorned by pictures painted by the most celebrated of modern artists.

Did the duchess, as she gazed upon these pictures, ever remember the brilliant young painter whose worst folly had been to love her with a wild and mad devotion?

No; her selfish soul knew no grief for the untimely fate of him she had murdered. She thought only of her own peril.

Her French maid had waited up to receive her; but the duchess dismissed her attendant, and then closely drawing the velvet curtains across the doorway of her dressing-room, she flung herself wearily into a low chair before the mirror.

The subdued light of wax tapers illuminated the luxurious apartment; costly toys of silver and gold were scattered about in every direction; open caskets of jewels glittered and flashed upon the dressing-table; but, amid all this splendor, the duchess sat with her two small hands pressed convulsively upon her heart, as if to still its violent beating.

She had thrown aside her domino and mask. Her beautiful face was of a ghastly and corpse-like pallor, — of a marble rigidity.

"The dead!" she murmured, — "the dead! Even my courage failed before that white accusing face; and Philip

Howland, my unscrupulous, cold-hearted tool, who could commit murder for a golden price, even he shrank from that ghastly sight, and could no longer help me. I put the Indian Gambia upon the track. Surely he will not fail — surely not. His soul is steeled to every common feeling. To him murder is a religion. Whoever that was whose face seemed the face of the dead, surely Gambia will destroy him."

The duchess rose from her low seat, and paced up and down the room, much as she had paced her apartment in Piccadilly upon the night of the artist's murder.

She stopped to look at a jewelled timepiece upon the alabaster mantel-shelf.

"Five o'clock," she muttered, — "five o'clock. Surely Gambia will not linger much longer."

Ten minutes after this, the white velvet curtains were parted, and the copper-colored face of the Indian appeared between them.

The duchess sprang towards him with a swift and cat-like bound.

"Speak, Gambia," she cried, — "speak, I implore, I command you. Have you succeeded?"

"Unfortunately, no, your Grace," answered the Thug. "Philip Howland and I searched the grounds for upwards of an hour, but could find no traces of the man. He had disappeared."

"O misery!" cried the duchess, with a low cry of despair. "Bah! fool, coward! Why did you come away with your work undone? I tell you I would have paid you as I have never paid you yet. I would have sacrificed the last penny I have, every jewel I possess."

The Indian smiled with a strangely sinister expression.

"Ay, madame," he said, "I doubt not that you would pay me well, but I am rich already, and have no great fancy for risking my life, even in your service. The laws of this country are hard against the murderer. I have escaped once, but I might fail to escape the second time. Had I met this man at yonder place by the water's side, I need have made but short work of his life. I could have lured him down to some lonely spot, and thrust him over the slippery and grassy brink to a silent grave in the quiet water; but I have failed in doing this, and therefore, lady, I shall do wisely, perhaps, in wishing you farewell."

"Farewell!" exclaimed the duchess, with an air of stupefaction; "you would not surely desert me?"

"It is no desertion, lady; I would return to my own country. I am rich, and there I may be a prince. Here my life is in danger. So farewell."

"You are determined, then?" exclaimed the duchess.

"Ay, lady; Gambia the Indian does not change his mind."

"Go, then!" cried Blanche Mortimer; "your crimes have made you rich, and your coward spirit would take you from all peril. But before you go it is in your power to grant me a favor. My wealth has helped to make you rich, so you cannot well refuse to do so. You and your countrymen are skilled in the manufacture of poisons."

"We are, lady; toxicology is a science we love to pursue."

"Do you know the secret of any powerful poison, subtle as it is powerful, which will strike like a thunder-clap, carrying death to him whose lips it touches, and yet defy the science of physicians to discover that the hand of murder has been busy with its victim?"

Gambia smiled.

"I do know of such a poison, lady," he answered, quietly.

"And you can procure it for me!"

"I can give it to you, madame," replied the Indian, significantly.

He took from his pocket a small morocco case, which looked as if it contained a cigar-holder.

He opened this case, and took from it a tiny golden phial.

"I have run many risks in this country of yours, lady," said the Indian, "but I have never run the risk of dying by the executioner's hand, for night and day I have carried this phial with me. One drop of the colorless liquid which it contains will strike painless and immediate death to him whose lips it touches."

"And you will give me that phial?"

"No, lady; but I will give you three

drops of the poison. I will give you the command over three lives, for each one of those three drops will be powerful enough to destroy a life."

The Duchess of Arlington selected a tiny crystal phial from among the perfume bottles in her dressing-case, and handed it to the Indian. The stopper of this phial was surmounted by a large and valuable emerald.

Gambia, the Thug, advanced towards the elegant dressing-table, and by the light of the wax candles which illuminated the Psyche mirror, he deliberately dropped three globules of a colorless liquid from the golden phial into that presented him by the duchess.

This done, he carefully replaced the golden phial in his morocco case, and handed the crystal phial to Blanche Mortimer.

"There, madame, he said, as he presented the tiny plaything, — "there, madame, is the boon which you have demanded of me. Those three drops of poison give you the command over three lives. I trust to your own discretion to use that power wisely. For myself, I bid you farewell. I shall start this morning from Southampton, whence I depart for my native country."

He bowed low, with that reverential ceremony peculiar to the Oriental races, and then glided, noiseless and serpent-like, from the chamber.

"I am glad he has gone," murmured the duchess, with a nervous shudder, as the velvet curtains dropped behind him; "his presence inspired me with the same dread as I might have felt had one of the hideous and poisonous reptiles of his native clime been near me. I am glad he has gone; and yet — yet — he might have been useful to me. I feel lonelier and more powerless without him."

The gentle daylight crept in through the rose-colored linings of the white velvet curtains, and made the pale face of the duchess even more ghastly than it had seemed before.

The glorious light of the fresh summer's morning struggled with the sickly glimmer of the waxen tapers.

Blanche Mortimer sighed wearily as she glanced at the splendor around her. She had perilled her false soul in order that she might become the mistress of these grandeurs, and now that they were hers they were powerless to give her one moment of peace.

"This Indian's desertion of me is an evil omen," she muttered; "I know not why, but it adds to the terror which I have felt to-night."

The duchess was about to throw off her masquerade dress, and fling herself upon the luxurious couch in her bedchamber, when the curtains once more were parted.

Blanche Mortimer looked up with a start of terror. Was it the Indian who once more intruded upon her loneliness?

No, it was the Duke of Arlington who entered. He was pale as death, and there was an awful calmness in his face,— the stony rigidity of a statue rather than the expression of a living man. The guilty woman uttered a stifled shriek of terror as she beheld her husband's face.

In all her recollection of him she could not remember having ever seen him thus.

But the invincible determination of her character came to her rescue. She disguised her fear with a terrible effort, and looked at the duke with a smile.

She still held the phial with the emerald stopper, grasped convulsively in her jewelled hand.

"You have risen early this morning, Gerald," she said, gayly. "You shame my dissipated habits. The marchioness's fete was so delightful that I lingered longer than I had intended. I have only just returned, and I am going to take a few hours' rest, for I am terribly sleepy."

The duke did not reply to this speech. He crossed the room with a slow and deliberate step, and stood with his elbow leaning upon the alabaster chimney-piece.

Blanche Mortimer yawned with an affectation of weariness, and sank into a low easy chair near the dressing-table.

"Yes, I am very, very tired," she murmured. "But it is only six o'clock, Gerald," she added, looking at a tiny

jewelled watch that lay amongst the trinkets before her; "I had no idea you were such an early riser."

"I am not an early riser," answered the duke, coldly; "I have not been to bed all night."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Blanche Mortimer; "did your parliamentary duties detain you so long at the House of Lords?"

"I was not at the House of Lords," answered Gerald, in the same cold and measured tone.

"Not at the House of Lords? Oh, then of course you were at some other political assembly,—some private meeting of your party. I am only sorry you were not at Twickenham; the *fete* was delicious."

"You enjoyed yourself very much, then?" said the duke, fixing his eyes with a searching gaze upon the face of the false and guilty creature whom he had so long loved.

"Oh, yes, indeed! I never remember enjoying myself more," answered Blanche Mortimer; "the gardens were a scene of enchantment. My only regret was that you were not there to share my pleasure," she added, with one of those half-pensive, half-tender smiles which had so often fascinated the duke.

Now his heart was marble. The mask had fallen from that once idolized face, and he could only look upon it with feelings of horror and disgust.

"You are mistaken, madame," he said; "I was there."

A deathly shadow came over the face of the duchess, and she grasped the emerald-stoppered phial still more tightly in her slender hand.

"You were there?" she gasped,—"you were at the marchioness's *fete?*"

"No, madame," replied the duke, "I was not at the *fete*. I was at Twickenham, but I had business of grave importance which led me away from the light and music, the dancing and gayety, to a dark and lonely cottage by the river's brink. I was the witness of a strange scene which took place in the torchlit chamber of that lonely cottage."

The duchess rose from her chair with a wild cry of terror and anguish. She tottered forward a few steps, and then fell upon her knees at the feet of the duke.

"Pity me!" she cried; "have pity upon me!"

"No," answered Gerald Mortimer, looking sternly down upon the beautiful form that was crouching at his feet. The time was when that loveliness, in such terrified abandonment, would have touched him to the heart; but that time was gone.

"No, madame," he cried; "I can feel no pity for you, neither can I feel revenge. You are too base, too utterly degraded and contemptible to evoke either sentiment in my breast. The past is past. I blot the love I bore for you from the history of my life as I would blot out a dark page from a book. You are free to go where you will. Mine shall not be the tongue which will betray you to the officers of justice. But doubt not that, fly whither you will, justice will track you out in the end. False wife, cruel mistress, murderess, traitress!—Heaven have mercy on you when the hour of doom shall come!"

The duchess did not rise from her kneeling attitude. She was bewildered, terror-struck, stupefied.

For the first time she felt that all was utterly lost.

"Were I alone possessed of your horrible secret I should feel that my doom was sealed," said the duke. "You, who did not hesitate to murder Hubert Monkton,—the man you had pretended to love,—would scarcely scruple to murder me, if you thought that by so doing you might retain possession of the wealth and grandeur for which you have perilled your soul. But *others* hold your fatal secret. A woman—an outraged and revengeful woman—holds in her relentless hand every clue of that horrible mystery. That woman will hunt you to your death. Her name is Isadora Monkton."

A wild shriek burst from the lips of the duchess. She remembered the dark and stern face of the Spanish girl.

Yes; there indeed was an avenger who would track her to her doom!

"Farewell," said the duke; "we have met to-night for the last time."

He left his guilty wife kneeling on

the ermine rug before the glittering hearth, and passed out of the room.

The curtains fell behind him, and Blanche Mortimer was alone. She lifted the tiny crystal phial with the emerald stopper, and looked at it with a strange smile.

"Yes," she murmured, "Gambia the Indian was right. He could laugh at the hangman while he possessed this."

. . . . . .

At twelve o'clock the next day a terrible scene took place in the house of the Duke of Arlington.

When the French lady's-maid lifted the curtains which fell before the archway leading to her mistress's luxurious dressing-room, she drew back with a long and piercing scream, which resounded through the stately mansion.

The beautiful duchess lay upon the ermine hearth-rug, with her face turned toward the domed and painted ceiling, — motionless, ghastly, DEAD!

CHAPTER LX.

THE WORK OF THE SLOW POISONER.

MARTHA DORK, the under nurse at Arlington Woods, was ill. Her health had been declining for some years, for a life of poverty and hardship had undermined a naturally good constitution. But the invalid met with every kindness in the household of which Lady Augusta Mortimer was the mistress.

Adela and Theobald were both equally indulgent. The nurse's work was immediately taken from her, and a young girl from the town of Mildrington was engaged to assist and wait upon the consequential upper nurse, Mrs. Palsome.

Martha, meanwhile, was removed from the neighborhood of the nurseries to a small but comfortable apartment upon the second floor of the splendid mansion.

Here the young surgeon, Joseph Maldon, attended upon her, visiting Arlington Woods every day, and paying the most unremitting attention to his *humble patient*.

Luigi Malatesta and his brother rarely met; when they did by any chance encounter each other, their greeting was the coldest which could have passed even between strangers.

The scheming Florentine felt that he had been betrayed by his less scrupulous brother, and he felt also that Joseph had some scheme of his own, the secret of which he, Luigi, was powerless to discover.

A wonderful change had come over the mind of the brilliant but designing Florentine. His was one of those natures in which the good and bad angels are ever struggling for the mastery. The soft pleadings of religion wrestled with the sterner voices of ambition, and throughout his life there had been times at which, in a moment of enthusiasm, he had felt inclined to relinquish all thoughts of earthly glory in the brighter and purer dream of heavenly bliss.

This better feeling had at length taken entire possession of his mind. He had been upon the threshold of a terrible crime, — the basest and worst which can stain the darkened soul of man, — the foul and treacherous crime of murder.

He had plotted the death of an innocent child, and as if by a miracle that death had been prevented, and his base and remorseless tool had relinquished the rich bribe that had been offered as the reward of his villany. Luigi Malatesta could but recognize the hand of Heaven in this.

"I would have stained my soul," he cried, conscience-stricken, when he remembered the black abyss of guilt into which he would have plunged himself. "I should forever have lost all hope of earthly peace or heavenly reward; but the hand of an all-merciful Providence prevented the dreadful deed, and I am saved. O ambition, fatal and ungovernable passion, which hurled Lucifer, the star of the morning, from the highest splendors of heaven to the blackest depths of hell, how nearly had I become thy slave!"

But it is not to be supposed that the Florentine surrendered all thought of earthly glory without a struggle. The struggle was a bitter and a long one, and it left Luigi Malatesta an altered

man; an altered man outwardly as well as inwardly, for his haggard face was worn by long nights of prayer and watching, during which his soul had wrestled with the arch-tempter of mankind. But the battle had been fought and won, and he was now a far happier man than he had ever been since the far-away days of his early boyhood.

Adela and Theobald saw the change, and for the first time the young man felt a sentiment of complete trustfulness in his late tutor. He no longer experienced that inexplicable shadow of fear which had haunted him for a long time since, when in the society of Luigi. Truth now beamed out of the Florentine's dark and thoughtful eyes; the genius of lies had been vanquished.

Matters were in this state when the nurse Martha was taken ill.

Joseph Maldon pronounced her illness to be low fever; he said that there was little doubt of her recovery, but he hinted that the fever was infectious, and he begged that neither Adela nor Theobald would, on any consideration, enter the sick-room.

Luigi Malatesta was present when his brother made this request, and looked with a thoughtful and searching glance at Joseph as he uttered the warning words.

"Indeed!" he said, quietly, when the young surgeon had finished speaking, "then neither Mr. nor Mrs. Mortimer must approach this poor dying woman upon any consideration whatever. She might wish to see them, perhaps; she might even declare that she had something of importance to communicate to them; but, however urgent her appeal, they must refuse to grant it. Is it not so, Mr. Maldon?"

"Certainly, Signor Malatesta," answered Joseph, coldly, "I can only repeat what I said just now, there would be danger to the health, perhaps to the life, of Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer, were they to enter the sick-room. Besides, I do not say that this poor woman is dying; I think that she will recover."

"But I do not think she will recover, Mr. Maldon," said Luigi, with marked significance, "at least, *not in your hands!*"

The insult conveyed in this remark was too pointed to escape observation, but Adela and Theobald only saw in it an insinuation against the *skill* of the young surgeon.

Joseph Maldon understood the deeper meaning of his brother's words, and his cheek blanched, and his nervous and restless upper lip quivered violently.

"I say again," exclaimed Luigi Malatesta, after a pause, during which Adela and Theobald had looked at him with unmitigated surprise, — "I say again, this woman will die; but before she dies she will seek to communicate a secret to either Mr. or Mrs. Mortimer."

"You must be dreaming, my dear Luigi," cried Theobald. "What secret should this poor woman have to reveal to me?"

"That will be for you to hear," answered the Florentine, gravely; "I have merely hazarded a prophecy. It is for time to prove whether I am a true or false prophet."

Very little more was said. A dark frown lowered upon the face of Joseph Maldon, but he did not openly resent the insult which had been offered him. He bade Adela and Theobald good-morning, and left the house.

As soon as he was gone Theobald Mortimer turned towards his old tutor.

"My dear Luigi," he said, "what in Heaven's name could you mean by treating that poor young fellow in such a manner? He is certainly very clever, and has always been remarkably attentive."

The Florentine smiled, a serious, earnest smile, which had little mirth in its expression.

"Theobald Mortimer," he said, almost solemnly, "you have been my pupil, my trusting, docile, generous pupil, and it would be hard if I did not love you. The best and brightest years of my life have been sacrificed to ambition, — that hard and cruel idol, who exacts most terrible sacrifices from his worshippers. But that fatal dream has passed from my darkened soul, and once more my heart opens to the warm impulses of human affection. A plot, a deep-laid plot, has been planned against you by a base and cruel traitor, but, with Heaven's help, it will be my

triumph to outwit and checkmate him. Will you let me do so? Will you be content to trust me, and to ask no questions until the hour comes—it is not far distant—in which I shall be able to tell all? Will you trust me, Theobald?"

"Trust you, Luigi! yes," answered the young man; "but what is the meaning of your strange words? What plot can have been planned against me, and by whom? Explain, I implore you!"

"I cannot explain, Theobald. I say again you must be content to ask no questions until the fitting time comes."

"Be it so, then; I will trust you. But one word. This woman upstairs,—is *she* concerned in this plot?"

"She is," answered the Florentine; "and it is from her lips that the revelation of the secret must come."

. . . . . .

Joseph Maldon did not return to Arlington Woods during the whole of that day. If, as Luigi had declared, his patient was indeed in a critical state, he left her to herself to fare as she might. Luigi Malatesa proved himself at least a true prophet in one matter. In the course of the afternoon a message was brought down to the drawing-room, in which Theobald and his wife sat, from the sick-room. Martha begged most earnestly that Mrs. Mortimer would visit her if only for a few moments.

"I will go," exclaimed Adela. "How strange, Signor Malatesta, that it should be as you prophesied! I will not fear the risk of infection."

"No, no, Adela," cried Theobald, "you shall not incur any danger; I will go."

"Stay," exclaimed the Florentine; "forgive me if I interfere, Theobald, but you have told me that you will trust me, and that you will do so without reserve. I cannot suffer you to go to that sick-chamber yet."

"But why not yet?"

"Because in an hour, or two hours at furthest," answered Luigi, looking at his watch, "I expect a man to arrive here who is skilled in the diagnosties of all diseases,—diseases even which have baffled the most distinguished physicians. When he comes he will declare whether you can safely enter that chamber. I must implore you, therefore, to wait for his coming."

"Be it so, Luigi," replied Theobald; "I have promised to obey you. But whence does this man come?"

"From Paris," answered the Florentine; "I telegraphed to him yesterday, telling him that his services were required here upon an errand of charity. That will be sufficient for him, and he will not fail to come."

"He is a very good man, then?"

"Yes; he is as good as he is skilful."

About an hour and a half after this a hired fly from the Mildrington station drove up to the marble portico of the front entrance of Arlington Woods.

An elderly man, with gray hair, and very plainly dressed in a long and somewhat loose black coat, alighted from the vehicle, and followed the servant into the apartment where Luigi Malatesta was seated with Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer.

This man was Father Durcel, the good and beloved priest, the scientific chemist, whom we last saw upon the night of Margaret Maldon's murder. The greeting between Luigi Malatesta and Father Durcel was a quiet but a cordial one.

"You have sent for me upon an errand of charity, a case of life and death, you say," said the good priest; "and I have come away from many duties in order that I may comply with your request. Who is it that claims my aid?"

"A woman, who lies in this house, languishing under a mysterious disease, and whose life, as I believe, trembles in the balance," answered Luigi Malatesta.

"Let me see her without delay, then," exclaimed the priest; "every moment is of value in such cases as these."

The two men left the drawing-room together, and ascended to the quiet chamber upon the second floor.

The sick woman was tossing feverishly upon her bed, her eyes unnaturally bright with wild excitement.

"She's been almost out of her mind,

sir," said the girl who was watching her, addressing herself to Luigi; "she goes on so about wanting to see her mistress, and having some secret to tell her. It seems as if it's that what preys upon her mind."

Father Durcel approached the bed, and took the feverish hand of the patient in his own. He scrutinized her haggard face for some moments with an earnest glance, and then quietly let fall her hand.

"Do not be alarmed," he said, gently; "we shall restore you to health and strength. The fever is not infectious," he added, turning to Luigi; "we will give her a cooling draught, and in two hours time she shall see her mistress."

"Oh Heaven bless you, sir!" cried the sick woman, — "Heaven bless you for those words of comfort!"

Father Durcel had brought a small medicine-chest with him. He mixed an effervescing draught, and handed it to the patient.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" cried Martha Dork, after she had drunk it; "that medicine seems to do me good, but the draughts that Mr. Maldon gave me always made me worse. They seem to give me such a burning pain after I drink them. But I have no doubt it is for my good," she added, with resignation.

Father Durcel sighed.

"I shall analyze these medicines," he said, taking up two or three bottles and a packet of powder from the table beside the bed. He retired into an adjoining room with Luigi Malatesta, and, seating himself at a lamplit table, for it was now dusk, he commenced his analysis. The Florentine watched him earnestly for about a quarter of an hour in perfect silence.

"It was as I suspected," he said, at last. "Yes; this woman has been poisoned. The cruel, slow poison of antimony has been doing its fatal work. But, thank Heaven! you have sent for me in time. I shall be able to save her; but the man who has prescribed these medicines must never again hold the life of a fellow-creature in his keeping. *He is a murderer!*"

"And I am almost as culpable as he," exclaimed Luigi, "for I once helped to shield him from the doom he had justly deserved."

"In Heaven's name what do you mean?" cried the benevolent priest, with an accent of intense horror.

"I mean that the medical man who has been attending yonder sick woman is no other than the murderer of the Rue Gueneville."

"And you shielded that man, — that cold-blooded assassin of a helpless woman?"

"I did," answered Luigi Malatesta; "I gave false information, but for which the agents of Victor Canlot might have succeeded in arresting the assassin."

"And, in Heaven's name, why did you do this?"

"Because — this — man — is — my brother."

And in a few sentences Luigi Malatesta told the story of the separation between himself and Joseph.

"I thought that I did right in shielding him," he murmured, when he had finished his story; "but now that I see of what further enormities he is capable, I feel that I have been criminal in not abandoning him to the justice he has outraged."

"But what motive could he have had for attempting the life of this unoffending woman?"

"That motive will be most likely revealed in the confession made by Martha Dork to her mistress," answered Luigi.

"But this time the murderer shall not escape," exclaimed Father Durcel. "I know little of your English law, but I suppose that it would be possible to arrest him immediately upon a charge of attempted poisoning. The evidence afforded by the contents of these bottles furnishes an undeniable proof of his villany."

Luigi Malatesta was ghastly pale, but he bowed his head as if in assent to that which the good priest had said.

"He is my brother," the Florentine murmured, sadly, — "my only brother; but I have sworn never again to stand between him and the retribution his crimes may bring upon him."

"He is a wretch, who, if allowed to

live, would number his victims by wholesale," answered Father Durcel; "he is almost too infamous for common pity. I call upon you, Luigi Malatesta, to assist the cause of justice, and to give information to the proper authorities, that they may at once secure this monster."

Luigi Malatesta bowed.

"I will obey you," he said, quietly.

He left the room, descended the stairs, ordered his horse, and rode at a rapid pace from Arlington Woods to the house of the nearest magistrate, to whom he revealed the terrible circumstances which stamped his brother as a would-be murderer. He spoke only of the poisonous medicines which had been administered to the nurse. He told nothing of Joseph's previous history, or of the murder in the Rue Gueneville.

The magistrate lost no time in issuing a warrant for the apprension of the young surgeon, but he was too late; for the constable and his companion, who went to Joseph Maldon's house armed with his document, were informed that the surgeon had started for London by the afternoon train.

They doubted the truth of this information, and insisted upon searching the house; but they soon discovered that the simple country servant girl had not deceived them. Joseph Maldon had indeed fled.

He had been obliged to go up to town upon particular business, the girl said, but he had promised to return to Mildrington early the next day.

It may be that Luigi Malatesta rejoiced when these tidings were conveyed to him. He had done his duty, but he was relieved at the thought that Joseph had perhaps escaped, and that the blood of a brother might not rest upon his soul.

The ties of kindred, however cruelly outraged, are not easily altogether sundered.

An hour before midnight, upon the night of Father Durcel's arrival at Arlington Woods, Adela Mortimer sat by the bedside of the sick nurse, while her husband stood with his elbow resting on the mantel-piece, listening intently to the revelation made by the conscience-stricken invalid.

Martha had told the story of her life, briefly and quietly. She was that same Martha who in her youth had assisted in the abduction of Paulina Oswald's infant from the village of Losvigny.

"I tried to persuade myself that I had done no wrong," she said, piteously appealing to those whom she felt that she had outraged; "but little by little the thought crept before me, that I had assisted in a crime of the same nature as that which had stained my youth long ago in France. I felt that the doctor must have had some stronger motive for his secret conduct, and for the heavy bribe which he had given me, than that of simply performing an operation which would be beneficial to the child, without your knowledge, and at last the thought flashed upon me that the children had been changed."

"Yes," exclaimed Adela, "it must have been so. Do you not remember, Theobald, that, after the baby's illness, I felt that a change had come over the child? I had not the same pleasure in caressing him; nay, more, he has never been the same to me since that time. You have laughed at what you have called my foolish fancies, Theo, but you see a woman's instinct is better sometimes than a man's wisdom."

Theobald Mortimer smiled.

"We must find the child, my dearest," he murmured,—"we must take immediate steps to recover the child. Remember that he is heir to the dukedom of Arlington."

"I remember nothing," exclaimed Adela, "except that he is my own precious darling. But surely we shall not have any difficulty in finding him?"

"I trust not, madame," said the sick woman, "for if my idea is right, I fancy that the doctor must have changed his child for yours. I remember seeing Mrs. Maldon's baby one day at Mildrington, and I remember that both she and her husband spoke of the likeness between the two infants."

"But what motive could this wretch have had for such a crime?" asked Adela.

"That is easily explained," answered Theobald; "he doubtless acted upon the idea, that by substituting his child for ours, he would, by and by, have unlimited power over the future Duke of Arlington."

"But you must have succeeded to the title and estates before your son, Theo," exclaimed the young wife.

"Perhaps so, my dearest Adela; but, on the other hand, this doctor is very skilful. He might have contrived to shorten my hold of the inheritance."

"He would have poisoned you?"

"He might have done so. The man who would not scruple to rob me of my child, would scarcely hesitate to take my life."

"I dare not hope that you will ever forgive me," murmured the sick woman; "but I have suffered, and suffered most bitterly, for the wrong that I have done. I told Mr. Maldon this; I implored him to reveal what he had done, to repair the wrong while it was possible to do so. I went even further than this; I threatened that I would speak out, and tell all his guilt and my own share in that guilt. He was giving me medicine at the time for a cold and cough, but from that hour I grew worse, and the fever shortly came on which has laid me prostrate here."

A dark shadow was upon Theobald Mortimer's face as the invalid said this. The fact was only too palpable,—Joseph Maldon had administered slow poison to his helpless accomplice, in order that her accusing voice might be silenced in death.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE RESTORATION OF THE LOST.

Let us once more enter that lonely dwelling by the river-side, which although, to all outward appearance, uninhabited, had long been the home of Isadora Monkton and Sebastian Contes, the Spanish sculptor. The young girl sat in one of the windows looking out upon the river Thames. The sun had set, and the darkness was fast creeping over the water. A few lonely boats passed now and then, but the chief traffic of the day was over, and the Chelsea dwelling-house seemed almost as far removed from busy human life as if it had been deep down in some quiet country village.

Isadora Monkton was pale as the sculptured bust of her cousin which still stood upon its pedestal at one end of the room. Her large eyes were fixed in a mournful and dreamy gaze. The business of her life was done. She had convinced the Duke of Arlington of the hideous perfidy of her whom he had so long cherished with an all-confiding devotion. She had avenged the wrongs of her Cousin Hubert. She had no longer any purpose in life, and she felt a sense of desolation which she had never before experienced.

Goaded on by a desperate desire for vengeance, she had thought of nothing but the one end and aim of her existence. Now that she had accomplished that all-absorbing desire, her soul sank within her under the crushing sense of her loneliness.

"Lonely! lonely! lonely!" she murmured. "Loveless, sad, and lonely from the beginning to the end!"

This was the one cry of despair which broke from a desolate heart.

The next moment Sebastian Contes entered. He had been admitted by the old woman who kept the house and waited upon Isadora. Even in the dim twilight of the room the young girl saw that the face of the Spaniard was white and corpse-like in its appearance.

She rose hurriedly from her seat and rushed towards him. She took his hand in hers. That hand was as cold as ice.

"Sebastian," she gasped, "Sebastian, speak, I implore you!"

"Presently, Isadora," answered the young man in a hoarse, half-stifled voice,—"presently; I have been agitated—and—and I am not yet calm enough to explain. I—"

He sank into a chair, and wiped the cold drops of perspiration from his brow.

The old woman entered with a lamp, which she placed upon a small table in the centre of the room.

She was about to close the windows and the shutters, when she was stopped by Sebastian Contes.

Leave the windows open," he said; "the cold air from the river is refreshing."

"But you are cold, Sebastian," murmured Isadora; "your hand is like ice."

"No, no, I am consumed by fever; leave the windows open."

"But we may be seen by any one from without. The tide is low, and foot-passengers passing along the river bank may approach close to these windows."

"What matter if they do? We have effected the purpose for which we have lived, Isadora. Concealment is no longer necessary to us."

The old women had retired from the apartment, and Isadora and Sebastian were now alone.

"True, Sebastian," answered the Spanish girl; "the purpose for which we have lived is accomplished."

There was a gloomy accent in her voice which betrayed the preoccupation of a mind whose leading purpose is lost.

"I have served you faithfully,—have I not, Isadora?" said Sebastian Contes, with almost solemn earnestness; "I have given myself up to your great scheme of vengeance, body and soul. My art and my ambition I have cast to the winds. I have trampled the budding glory of my life beneath my feet—for your sake—for your sake. For nearly two years I have lived only for the achievement of your vengeful purpose. That purpose is accomplished. Blanche, the traitress, the lovely demon whose hands were dyed with blood, whose soul was steeped in deception, is levelled to the dust. All is done that you would have had done. Speak, then, Isadora, am I to have no reward for my service?"

The Spanish girl looked at him with wild, earnest, wondering eyes, as if trying, and trying vainly, to read the meaning of his words.

"Reward!" she repeated,—"reward! What reward would you seek? You know that I am poor; you know that I have led a life of beggary in order to accomplish my scheme of vengeance. What, then, would you ask of me, Sebastian?"

"Isadora," cried the young Spaniard, cut to the quick by these words, "do you think it is gold that I seek from you? If you were wealthier than Percival Holmwood, the millionnaire, I would not accept one sixpence from your hand, though I were starving. Think you I have no pride, no consciousness of manly dignity? That which I have given to you, Isadora Monkton, can never be bought. I have sacrificed my career, my ambition, two years out of the best and brightest period of a man's life. I have yielded up my hopes my very soul; and now you would offer me gold in exchange. You are unjust, and you are cruel, Isadora Monkton."

"Forgive me, Sebastian, forgive me!" exclaimed the Spanish girl, clasping her hands with an almost piteous gesture. "What am I to do? What am I to say? The purpose for which I have lived has so entirely absorbed my every thought, my every dream. I fear now that my brain is almost failing me. I am lost,—bewildered,—reckless of the future,—eager only for death."

"Isadora, Isadora! for Heaven's sake speak not thus! Cannot you guess the boon I would have asked of you?"

"No,—no."

The young Spaniard sank on his knees at the feet of the bewildered girl. He lifted his clasped hands to her in an attitude of supplication.

"Your love, Isadora!" he cried; "your love! your love! There is no other reward I seek upon this earth."

Isadora Monkton uttered a low cry of despair.

"No, no," she gasped; "say not so, Sebastian. My heart is dead to love. All love of mine is buried in the unhallowed grave of Hubert Monkton. My gratitude,—my warmest, deepest, and truest gratitude is yours; but I can give no more. My heart is dead, Sebastian,—dead! I shall retire to a convent in some foreign land, and there drag out the remaining years of my life, forgotten and unknown."

"Is this your irrevocable decision, Isadora?"

"It is," murmured the Spanish girl. But the next moment she recoiled before the expression of unutterable despair depicted in the face of the sculptor.

"Stay, Sebastian," she said. "I owe you much for that which you have done. You are right. The sacrifices you have made for me demand some sacrifice in return. If a heart that is dead; if a soul whose every light seems forever extinguished; if a life whose joys are buried forever;—if *these* can be precious to you, Sebastian Contes, they are yours. I have no more to give."

"And you would wed me, Isadora; you would be mine, although you do not love me?"

"Say, rather, although I *cannot* love, Sebastian. The power to love is dead."

"But you would be mine?"

"I would."

"You would sacrifice yourself to me?"

"It is little to sacrifice that which is worthless."

"And you would make that sacrifice, Isadora?"

"I would, willingly."

"*Then you shall not!*" cried the Spanish sculptor, with sudden energy. "No, Isadora. Love, if it be true love, should have no thought of self. I will accept no sacrifice from you, my own adored one. I will freely own that I had hoped time might have effaced the fatal love of the past; that my constant association with you might have won your regard; and that the image of Hubert Monkton might have faded from your heart, save as that of a kinsman and a friend. But one passion has absorbed my life; and I cannot complain if you, too, have been constant to one affection. Art shall be my mistress and my bride henceforth, Isadora, and I will be content to bid you farewell, and to spend the rest of my life far away from you, where the memories of the past will only remain to me of my love, and where I may pray for your happiness."

"My happiness!" echoed Isadora, in a tone of bitter mockery. "There is no such thing as happiness for me upon this earth, Sebastian. I can only pray that there may be peace for me in heaven."

"You know not, Isadora, *what* may await you," said Sebastion, gravely. "Strange things have happened before to-day. The romances of real life are often more extraordinary than those of fiction."

There was a strange significance in his manner. A singular smile illumined his pale face, and Isadora recoiled from him with a gaze of wonder.

"What in Heaven's name do you mean, Sebastian!" she exclaimed. "Surely, nothing new can have happened!"

"Yes; much that is new has happened."

"Do not trifle with me, Sebastian Contes. Let me hear the worst you have to tell; it cannot surprise me. I tell you again, my heart is dead,—dead to all feeling, to every emotion."

"To *every* emotion, Isadora?"

"Yes."

The Spaniard smiled incredulously.

"Many things have happened to-day, Isadora," he said. "I told you when I first entered this room that much had occurred to agitate me. I came here from Cavendish Square, from the mansion of the Duke of Arlington."

"Indeed."

"Death has been busy in that splendid mansion."

Isadora Monkton displayed no emotion.

"Death!" she repeated, in a dull voice, as if she scarcely comprehended the meaning of the word.

"Yes; the Duchess of Arlington died by her own hand before ten o'clock this morning. She was found by her lady's maid, lying on the floor of her dressing-room, with a tiny jewelled phial clasped in her hand. But for the evidence of this phial, none would have guessed that Blanche Mortimer had destroyed herself; for the poison she had taken was subtle enough to have baffled the penetration of every physician in London."

"She is dead, then," murmured Isadora, in a strange and hollow voice; "she is dead, this beautiful fiend, this arch demon,—the destroyer of Hubert Monkton!"

"What if she had not been his destroyer?" asked Sebastian, looking fixedly at the Spanish girl.

"Not his destroyer!" cried Isadora. "Have we not every evidence that a murder was committed, and at the instigation of Blanche Mortimer?"

"Yes, Isadora; we know that a murder was committed; we know that an unhappy and unsuspecting victim was lured from the Blackfriars hotel to the hideous den of vice and iniquity kept by Elizabeth Hepwell; but villains and traitors are apt sometimes to overreach themselves. What if it should have been so in this case? What if some fatal mistake should have been made; fatal, I mean, to the plotters of death? What if *the wrong man should have been murdered?*"

Isadora Monkton raised her hands, and clasped them wildly upon her brow.

"No, no, no!" she cried, passionately. "Have pity upon me, Sebastian Contes. Do not drive me mad. I am accustomed to despair; but one ray of hope — one dazzling, blinding ray of hope — would kill me."

"No, Isadora," answered Sebastian. "Joy is sometimes terrible to bear, but it does not often kill. I do not ask you to hope. I only ask you to consider that strange mistakes have happened before to-day."

"Yes, yes."

"Strange mistakes have happened. What if the wrong man should have been lured to that foul den, the 'Raven'? This would account for the fact that the letters — the letters which Blanche Mortimer sought so eagerly to regain; the letters to obtain which she stained her soul with the crime of murder, and placed herself in the power of a menial and his hellish accomplice, — were not found upon the person of the murdered man. It was well known to you, as well as to Lady Blanche, that Hubert Monkton had those letters in his keeping when he left his house upon the night of the 13th of October. Had he been murdered, those letters must have been found upon him."

"You torture me, — you madden me!" gasped Isadora, wildly. "Was Hubert Monkton murdered, or was he not?"

"He was not."

"And you know this —?"

"From his own lips!" cried a familiar voice behind Isadora; and in the same moment a dark form came between the gray evening sky and the window, and Hubert Monkton sprang from the low window-sill into the room.

He had been waiting without, in the dusk, for the promised signal, which was to come from Sebastian's lips.

Isadora uttered a wild cry, and fell fainting into her cousin's arms.

. . . . . .

It is needless to dwell long upon the explanation of this strange scene.

Hubert Monkton had escaped, as if by a miracle, from the hands of the wretches who had plotted to destroy him.

The reader knows that on the night of the 13th of October, the artist left his studio, in a dull and despondent mood, to keep his appointment at the hotel in Blackfriars; but he had not driven far in the Hansom cab engaged by him, when the horse fell upon the wet and slippery pavement, and Hubert was thus compelled to alight from the vehicle.

Upon what trifles hang the awful issues of life and death!

This chance threw Hubert Monkton across the path of a brother artist, — a young and struggling man; a man who toiled day and night in a perpetual battle with starvation.

"This chance of patronage, which I despise, would be invaluable to George Lawson," Hubert thought, as he stood for a few minutes talking of commonplace subjects with the young artist. "What if I surrender my chances to him? Civilized life has become hateful to me since the discovery of Blanche's treachery. A vessel sails for Australia to-morrow. I will run down to Liverpool by the mail train to-night, and bid farewell to England and all I have ever known. I have met with nothing but falsehood and disappointment. Why should I linger in a land which has become odious to me?"

These thoughts flashed through the mind of the artist with the rapidity of lightning. It is such sudden impulses which govern the destinies of passionate and energetic men. In a few moments the resolution was formed, the decision arrived at: Hubert Monkton determined to sail for Australia.

He explained to George Lawson the nature of the letter he had received, gave him the address, and saw him take his seat in a Hansom cab, in order to be in time, if possible, to keep the appointment.

He little knew that he was sending this unhappy young man to meet a violent death from the hands of a cold-blooded and merciless assassin.

He little knew how tenderly, how devotedly he was beloved by his cousin, Isadora Monkton, and what misery and anguish would be caused to that unhappy girl by the step he was about to take.

Despair is selfish. Hubert Monkton thought only of his own sufferings, — his own blighted faith. He hurried to the Euston station, took his ticket for Liverpool, and before noon on the following day had taken his berth on board the good ship "Mersey," bound for Melbourne.

For nearly two years he remained away. In the gold-fields he had earned a fortune which would make him independent for life.

But the sick yearning for his native land, and for that only friend whom he had left behind, had brought him home. He had not forgotten his feelings for Blanche, though he had never forgiven her treachery.

His first visit, upon reaching London, had been to the house of the Duke of Arlington. There he heard of the suicide of the duchess, and there he also met Sebastian Contes. George Lawson's fate had never been inquired into, for the young man had been utterly friendless, — one of those human waifs and strays upon the vast sea of life, who have neither home nor kindred.

The people with whom the young artist had lodged knew that he was poor, — knew that he was often almost on the verge of starvation.

They imagined, therefore, that he had succumbed beneath the burden of his troubles, and that he had committed suicide. Many disappear thus in the city of London. No search is instituted; no inquiries are made.

The victim is too poor, too obscure to excite much interest in his fate. It is *supposed* that he has committed suicide, and no more is said.

. . . . .

Within a year of Hubert Monkton's return, the artist led his Cousin Isadora to the altar of a quiet, rustic church, half hidden in a woodland spot, upon the outskirts of a village in Devonshire.

Near this village the painter had purchased a small estate, resolved henceforth to lead a peaceful country life, wholly devoted to his art and to the faithful girl who had loved him so truly, and had, at all peril to herself, avenged his wrongs.

Philip Howland and Gambia, the Indian, fled from England immediately after the suicide of the Duchess of Arlington.

None knew whither they went. None could ever discover where they hid themselves. They were rich, and they went doubtless to enjoy the price of their treachery and infamy.

Those who truly understand the philosophy of life know that nothing but misery ever awaits those whose souls are steeped in sin. However hardened the conscience of the murderer may be, the vengeance of Heaven tracks him out. A curse is upon him, and upon every guinea of his blood-stained gold.

Percival Holmwood found no difficulty in establishing the fact of his parentage. His wealth proved all-powerful, aided by the evidence of Mary Burton's confession and the miniature of his mother. He was acknowledged by the surviving members of the Valancy family, and formally assumed his father's name, with the approval of the French government.

Need we add that he married Aurora? — no longer the nameless orphan, but now the only daughter and heiress of Lady Oswald.

The two children were once more

changed. Adela Mortimer received her own blue-eyed darling, and Lilian Maldon's infant was restored to her.

All this was easily brought about, for Joseph Malatesta had died in Italy, — whither he had fled with his wife's fortune — of a fever, and on his death-bed had made a full confession of his crimes. Luigi remained in the household of Theobald Mortimer. He had learned a bitter lesson. He was no longer ambitious, for he knew that unscrupulous ambition must ever be closely allied to crime.

It is only necessary to explain that one of the instruments of Isadora's vengeance was a waxen mask, moulded from the marble busk of Hubert Monkton.

This mask had reproduced the face of the missing man. It had been worn in the box at the Parisian opera-house and in the lonely cottage at Twickenham, by Percival Holmwood. It was thus that the wretched murderess, Blanche Mortimer, had believed that she looked upon the face of the dead.

There is no more to be told. Aurora and Percival, Isadora and Hubert, Adela and Theobald, are happy, — happy in each other's affection. Gerald Mortimer has suffered bitterly, — suffered from the treachery of the woman he had so tenderly loved; but he is surrounded by those who love him, and in whom he can confide, and he, too, is happy. Lilian Maldon, — or, rather, Lilian Malatesta, — lives in a pretty house at Fulham, with John Primmins, who is almost as fond of her and her child as of his beloved Aurora.

The Cheap Jack has an excellent income settled on him by his adopted child; and Lilian is well off, for her fortune has been restored to her in its full amount by the death of her father and her husband.

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